**The Thesis Committee for S. Dennis Gilbert**
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# Lower East Side Cowboy:
# On Viewing Martin Scorsese's Gangster Pictures Through A Western Lens

**APPROVED BY**
**SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Thomas Schatz, Supervisor

Charles Ramirez-Berg

# Lower East Side Cowboy:
# On Viewing Martin Scorsese's Gangster Pictures Through A Western Lens

**by**

**S. Dennis Gilbert**

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# Dedication

for Kelli & Ben

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# Abstract

## Lower East Side Cowboy:
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S. Dennis Gilbert, M.A.

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Supervisor: Thomas Schatz

Despite a five decade long career and a body of work that encompasses nearly every format and genre of film, in both popular and professional circles, Martin Scorsese's name is synonymous with the gangster picture. He is also known for his devout, lifelong cinephillia, initiated, at least in part, by a boyhood obsession with Westerns; particularly, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), which has remained a mainstay in the director's interviews and discussions. Additionally, Scorsese was a member of the first generation of university-educated filmmakers, where exposure to the burgeoning field of film studies codified the merit of previously disparaged genre pictures, including his beloved Westerns.

While there is natural overlap between the gangster and Western genres, this study examines the ways in which five of Scorsese's best known and critically acclaimed gangster pictures; *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967), *Mean Streets* (1973),

*GoodFellas* (1990), *Casino* (1995), and *Gangs of New York* (2002) instead can be understood to structure their protagonists' journeys along Western trajectories, recontextualizing Western generic rituals and tropes behind the gangster film facade.

*Taxi Driver* (1976) is included as something of an exception that proves the rule. While the film is often argued to exemplify the 'urban Western,' and while there exists a large body of scholarly work that compares Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) journey to that of *The Searchers*' protagonist Ethan Edwards' (John Wayne), this study demonstrates how the film does not resemble the generic Western in the manner as do the others.

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# Introduction

For better or worse, Martin Scorsese's name, in both popular and professional circles, is synonymous with gangster pictures. Certainly, more ardent fans and admirers also expect films bearing the phrase "a Martin Scorsese picture" in the head credits to contain heightened, expressive imagery, a rarely stationary camera possessed with the nervous energy of its creator, a soundtrack culled from hits off the rock, pop, R&B and doo-wop airwaves that have been silent for decades, allusions to both classical Hollywood and international cinema and intense explorations of powerful emotional themes: family, ambition, sacrifice, betrayal, loss, pain. Indeed, his illustrious, 50+ year career has yielded everything from surrealist comedies to Hitchcockian thrillers, musicals, costume dramas, epic bio-pics, short and long-form documentaries and music videos, demonstrating his mastery across multiple genres and forms.

Yet, despite the director's insistence that the majority of his films are not gangster films (nor "even *that* violent" [Schickel 54]), his best known and most critically acclaimed work bears the gangster picture's signature, centering on the criminal exploits of white, working class, ethnic (usually Italian) sons of immigrants in large, urban, East Coast cities. Despite a filmography that includes a high percentage of now-canonized 'masterpieces,' and despite Roger Ebert's oft-repeated assessment of Scorsese as "America's greatest living director," his first (and, as of this writing, only) Oscars for Best Director and Best Picture came as a result of *The Departed* (2007), a fairly conventional gangster picture. The following year, an American Express television commercial satirically presented the lengths even an established actor like Tina Fey is willing to go for the honor of being "kicked to death" in one of his films. Certainly, the humor in the ad, bolstered by Scorsese's own involvement, acknowledges this is an exaggerated caricature, but it is a position the ad both mocks and celebrates. The ad relies solely on his name and image and does not evoke his work, yet Fey's line, and the humor

within, is still understood by most viewers. When a credit card company is able to, quite literally, bank on Scorsese's reputation in such a way, popular culture has spoken: Martin Scorsese makes gangster films.

Another celebrated facet of the director's public persona, especially in the latter half of his career, bolstering his role as an elder statesman of American film, is his lifelong, devout cinephillia. (Interestingly, his cinephillia is also referenced in the AmEx commercial.) In addition to kickstarting the archival and preservation campaigns in the late 1970s that ultimately led to the founding of The Film Foundation, there is hardly a documentary, piece of DVD bonus material or YouTube video on film history that does not include at least a clip of Scorsese enthusiastically expounding on the meaning of a camera angle, the effect of a particular piece of editing or the impact of a certain film on the trajectory of the entire medium. Marc Raymond, in his 2013 study, *Hollywood's New Yorker*, suggests that Scorsese's love of film has even transformed itself into a sort of "cultural capital," arguing that, through such preservation and celebration efforts like The Film Foundation, and epic film history documentaries, *A Personal Journey* (1995) and *Il Mio Viaggio in Italia* (1999), the director has become inextricably linked with the medium itself, both as a cultural object and an art form.

Mirroring his Foundation's mission to save all films without value judgments, the director admits his penchant for films and genres once considered B level, especially the Western, with which he appears to have a particularly strong infatuation. In an oft-repeated anecdote, Scorsese cites King Vidor's 1946 Western epic *Duel In The Sun* as the first film he remembers viewing as a child, and subsequently "being very, very obsessed with Westerns;" Cinecolor spectacles and B-pictures alike (Kelly 85). References and discussions of Westerns have continued to pepper interviews and conversations throughout his career, suggesting a lifelong affinity for the genre, not simply a passing thrill from his youth. One Western in particular, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), seems to have left an extremely lasting impression, given how

consistently Scorsese mentions it, and its purposeful evocations in both *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967) and *Mean Streets* (1973). Despite depicting a world "exactly the opposite… [of] where [he] lived" (Kelly 85), Scorsese saw his something of his experience in the film. "Wayne's character [Ethan Edwards] reflected America. We couldn't articulate it, but that was the tone of everything around us" (Schickel 51).

Perhaps more importantly, appreciation of the Western served as an important foundation of the burgeoning film studies field. As a member of the first generation of filmmakers to receive university education and training, Scorsese was among the initial recipients of (now foundational) theoretical works by critics like Andrew Sarris and Andre Bazin, whose Auteur Theory espoused the merits of heretofore disparaged genre films like the Western and the gangster film. While other high-brow critics saw such films as being on the wrong side of the art vs commerce divide, Bazin famously called the Western "the American film *par excellence*" (140), confirming that Westerns were more than just a childhood thrill/fantasy; they themselves had formulas worth studying, and something valuable to say. Scorsese recalls, "we [film students] learned that the new critics liked John Wayne films too - except they weren't just John Wayne movies, but John Ford and Howard Hawks working through him. What had impressed us when we were young had impressed others, too" (Christie and Thompson 18).

Therefore, if, as Bazin argues, the Western "possess[es]… a secret that somehow identifies it with the essence of cinema" (141), then it stands to reason that we will see aspects of the Western in the work of the most cinephillic director in the first generation of university educated, cine-literate filmmakers. This study, then, examines the ways in which the Western's influence can be seen in the director's work, more specifically, in the gangster pictures with which his name is most associated. This is not to say that all of Scorsese's gangster films inherently resemble Westerns, or that the films in this study should not be understood as gangster films, or even that this combination of genres was necessarily a conscious choice on

the director's part. Nonetheless, this study will illustrate how, in many of his most well known and critically acclaimed films, despite their urban settings, proximity to criminal enterprise and working class, ethnic characters, the manner in which the films consistently present their protagonists and structure his journey more closely resembles a that of a Western than a gangster picture. For as much as Scorsese's childhood was characterized by gangsters on the street corners, it was perhaps more so defined by Hollywood Westerners on the screen.

While "the Western's capacity to accommodate many different kinds of meanings" (Cawelti 56) has led genre scholar Thomas Schatz to declare the Western "the most flexible of narrative formulas" (*Hollywood Genres* 45), the gangster and Western genres are not nearly as dissimilar as the initial differences of costume and setting might suggest. Both are anchored by psychologically stagnant men with guns who "mediate cultural contradictions" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 34) through violence. Both the gangster and the Westerner bound to and motivated by a personal code of honor which motivates their actions, and both men ultimately belong to a social group comprised of other men. In both genres, women occupy the fringes of the narrative, (a common modern criticism leveled against Scorsese) and generally exist in an either/or binary with the 'good' women acting as suffocating harbingers of domesticity, and the 'bad' ones holding a doomed, but quasi-masculine independence and freedom (until, of course, all that is taken from her).

Importantly, however, the gangster film follows the rise and fall of an urban criminal, an enterprising young man who was denied the "normal possibilities of happiness and achievement" (Warshow 136) due to his working class, immigrant/ethnic background. Though the gangster is violent, brutal, aggressive, "expansive and noisy" (Warshow 136), he is nonetheless an "essentially positivist cultural model… the perverse alter ego of the ambitious, profit minded American male" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 84-5). Given no other options, the

gangster is shown merely to be "applying himself in the only profitable and engaging occupation available" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 89), and he proves very successful at it. At their base, his crimes are a reaction against the very same alienating urban environment which created him, and he "uses the depersonalizing milieu and its technology… to plunder its wealth" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85).

However, because these actions place him in direct conflict with the dominant social order, "there is really only one possibility — failure" (Warshow 132). While the Hays Code no longer necessitates that anti-social behavior be punished, "the death of the movie gangster is an essential generic formality" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 90) that confirms the gangster's "true identity… [is] a style of life, a kind of meaning" (Warshow 133).

The Western hero, on the other hand, is a 'man in the middle,' shown to possess both the civilized qualities of the burgeoning frontier town, and the savagery of the outlaw/Indian, which has made possible his success in the harsh and unforgiving frontier landscape. He himself is positioned as the "meeting point between civilization and savagery" (Cawelti 20) and while he spends the film "mediating the forces of order and anarchy" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 26), both internally and externally, he ultimately cannot 'choose' between his contradictory impulses; he cannot betray one side of himself in order to acquiesce to the other.

This, like everything else he does, is motivated by the Westerner's individually derived, stringent 'code of honor,' which cannot be compromised for anyone, not even himself, and from which he cannot stray. This code does not necessarily align with the prescribed rule of law and order, which the Westerner views as "a collective impersonal ideology imposed on the individual from without" (Ray 62), but, as Cawelti notes, "the code of the West is not inimical to [the] law" (70) either. It simply exists apart; because the Westerner is acknowledged to have arrived at his code 'naturally,' through a life of self reliance in nature, he is justified in acting outside of man's law, as long as his behavior is within the perimeters of his own, naturally derived law.

Importantly, however, “the code of the West is in every respect a male ethic and its values and prescriptions relate primarily to relationships between men… the code of masculine honor must always take precedence over other obligations” (Cawelti 51, 72).

Unlike the gangster, who directs his violence against society’s rules and laws, the Westerner fights *for* society, aiming his violence at those so possessed by savagery that they refuse to fall under the rule of law, those who would prove threatening to the frontier community if they were allowed to remain. Yet, although the Westerner is “fundamentally committed to the townspeople” (Cawelti 29) and spends the film fighting “to bring law and order to the West, [he] continually flees the very communities he helps found” (Cawelti 54). While he has ostensibly used his violence for good, he understands that his ability to wield it so effectively would ultimately compromise the town’s safety and the stability of the law in the future. In remaining in the town, he embodies the very threat he just vanquished, so the Western resolves this by removing the hero from the community, in one of two ways. The first, of course, is the Westerner’s iconic ‘ride into the sunset’ in which the hero recognizes his ‘basic incompatibility’ and willingly returns himself to the savage landscape from which he emerged. But, when the hero refuses to acknowledge the threat his presence poses, as is often the case with later Westerns, the community, “which can no longer permit the explosions of individual will and aggression necessary to defend the heroic honor” (Cawelti 44), is forced to act, and the hero is banished. This, of course, parallels the gangster film in that, by the film’s end, the community is rid of both heroes, but the manner and reason for this removal is an important distinction.

In the exceedingly rare instance which a Westerner does remain a part of civilized society at the film’s conclusion, it is only when he has been brought, by marriage, under the civilizing, domesticating influence of a woman. Like the gangster film, the Western places “a strong emphasis on male bonding… the major emotions in the film [are] derived from male friendship[s]” (Cawelti 123) and the role of women in the men’s lives are deemphasized. As

Cawelti writes, “women are primary symbols of civilization in the Western. It is the schoolmarm even more than the entrepreneur who symbolically represents the end of the old wilderness life” (30) and it only under her by coming under her restraining affect that his savagery can be sufficiently contained enough to allow him to safely remain. (As we might expect, this does not occur in any of the films examined in this study.) Thus, as Robert Warshow observes, “the Westerner is… not compelled to seek love…[which] is, at best, an irrelevance” (137). Instead, “the Western hero’s true social milieu… is a group of masculine comrades [and his] association with the boys remained one of the most important aspects of the hero’s life” (Cawelti 42-3).

Further, the Western takes place at a very specific moment in the past: the closing of the frontier, the point at which civilization is poised to overtake savagery. Importantly, it is located at “exactly that moment when options are still open” (Kitses 12) but rapidly closing. Historically speaking, this corresponds to the decades of Westward Expansion immediately following the Civil War, in which “the western United States, that pre-civilized locale, was establishing codes of law and order as a basis for contemporary social conditions” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 48). Because Westerns are necessarily told in hindsight, with the audience inherently benefitting from the triumph of civilization over savagery, “savagery is implicitly understood to be on the way out” (Cawelti 20). Thus the viewer can enjoy the action without any real concern as to whether the Westerner or the savage will emerge victorious, in much in the same way as we can enjoy the gangster’s exploits, secure in the knowledge that, in the end, the threat his actions pose to the social order will be terminated.

While the gangster and Western genres share many similarities and tropes, and on some level, may be understood as an examination of the ways in which essentially identical generic characters are influenced and interpreted primarily by their position in relation to society, one generic ritual that belongs only to the Western and is not found in the gangster film is the community dance. Originally intended to display “a community worth saving” (Schatz, *Old*

*Hollywood* 137), the dance functions to remind the viewer why the Westerner works so hard. The women, children and peaceful, civilized men of the burgeoning society serving as visual justification for his violence; our hero works in violence so that these people will not know a savage existence.

Therefore, this study will examine the ways in which *Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *GoodFellas* (1990), *Casino* (1995), and *Gangs of New York* (2002) present Western generic rituals and tropes behind the gangster film facade. All (save *Taxi Driver*, which will be explained below) present their protagonist as a man in the middle who spends the film mediating between his own version of civilization and savagery. Each is ultimately removed from society due to his unbending adherence to a personal code of honor; either by his own hand, or, as the later Westerner, is forcibly removed by that society in which his actions helped to secure. Further, each, with the notable exception of *Casino*, features a community dance scene which comments on the its community. The films are presented in chronological order; whatever Scorsese's conscious or subconscious aims may have been with regard to this gangster/Western fusion, when viewed sequentially, a movement towards a more seamless union of gangster and Westerner can be discerned, advancing from the overt heavy handedness of the explicit discussions of Westerns in *Knocking* to the "frontier town" setting of *Gangs*.

Interestingly, all of these films, with the exception of *Knocking*, (and *Taxi Driver*) contain a supporting character who does typify the gangster's arc. This gangster figure is attributed much of the film's 'savagery,' and the relationship between this gangster figure and the protagonist mirrors the relationship between the Westerner and the savage/Indian figure in the Western.

*Knocking* provides the starting point, as, in many ways, it contains a blueprint for the themes Scorsese will revisit his entire career. While many critics focus on the Catholic elements of the film, I argue that JR's (Harvey Keitel) stringent adherence to the unbending 'code of honor' which ultimately sees him reject the Girl (Zina Bethune) is derived not from his religiosity, but from his emulation of his onscreen Western heroes. Such an argument helps contextualize both the upstate visit that serves as the midpoint, but also the infamous 'sex scene,' included only in order to gain distribution, which often vexes viewers. While the film does not contain the gangster figure that the other films will, JR's pals (importantly, the only members of any community or civilization we see) play the savage role well, and the film continually reinforces JR's 'basic incompatibility' with the inhabitants of his neighborhood.

*Knocking* also begins a theme present in nearly all of the films in this study, a recontextualization of a common Western ritual, absent in nearly all gangster pictures; the community dance. Originally intended to display the "community worth saving" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 137) for whom the Westerner dedicates his efforts, here we see a community not worth saving. As we shall see, even the Girl, a role long examined for her embodiment of harmful female passivity, here will be considered for the ways in which she both aligns with and subverts Western feminine norms, particularly in her choice of parting words.

*Mean Streets* scales back the heavy handed discussions of cinematic Westerns and considerably ratchets up the spiritual considerations, while at the same time further crafting and streamlining the Westernness of Charlie's (Harvey Keitel) journey. Charlie is specifically a man in the middle, mediating his spiritual beliefs and the secular laws of the neighborhood, between helping Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) and allowing Johnny to make his own path, between his love for Teresa (Amy Robinson) and his adherence to his uncle Giovanni's (Cesare Danova) law, which is tied into his reputation and standing in the neighborhood. While the neighborhood community is far more savage than is typical of a frontier settlement, nonetheless, there is a

respected way of doing things and some semblance of law and order, which Charlie is associated with though his connection to Giovanni. *The Searchers'* (1956) influence is once again felt in Charlie's "quest" to save Johnny; Charlie is motivated by self interest and a desire to make Johnny conform to the image Charlie holds in his mind for him and is blind to Johnny's own desire for his life, just as Ethan (John Wayne) has no regard for Debbie's (Natalie Wood) feelings towards her own situation.

*Mean Streets* also reenacts the fate common to the late Westerner who does not remove himself willingly from the community: Charlie is banished, not killed at the end. Additionally, like *Knocking, Mean Streets* provides a corruption of the community dance ritual, and uses Teresa to both reaffirm and subvert Western notions of female domesticity, as well as the discrepancies between the roles of the 'good' and 'bad' woman.

Johnny Boy is the first of the true gangster figures we meet in this study, (while he does not "die in the gutter" in the film, initial drafts of *Season of the Witch* make it clear he was intended to) his actions and behavior drawing clear parallels between the gangster and the Western savage (be he Indian or outlaw). The close relationship between Johnny and Charlie here, I argue, mirrors the close, if combative and oppositional, relationship between the Westerner and savage found in many Westerns.

*Taxi Driver* exists in this study as a necessary deviation, as the film is most emphatically not a gangster film, and, as I will argue, not a Western either. However, due to the large body of scholarly work drawing comparisons to and parallels between Ethan Edwards' quest to save Debbie in *The Searchers* and Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) drive to save Iris (Jodie Foster), (not to mention screenwriter Paul Schrader often explicitly acknowledged this film's *Searchers*' inspiration) my purpose here is not to negate such comparisons, but demonstrate how drawing inspiration from a Western does not inherently transfer Westernness upon a film. Far from being a psychologically stagnant protagonist bound to a personal code of honor, Travis is an

extremely unreliable narrator who, in lashing out indiscriminately in any and all directions, is shown to lack steady, rational motivation for any of his actions, marking him the antithesis of the Western hero who pursues his quest with single-minded determination. For that chapter, the study will change gears slightly, to argue that, *Taxi Driver* is, in fact, much more Robin Wood's "incoherent text" than it is an 'urban-' or 'Right-' or 'street- Western'.

By the time of the last three films, Scorsese's position in the industry has shifted from a young upstart filmmaker, fighting to make a name for himself and striving to express deep personal truths, to a respected veteran, a bridge between the Classic and New Hollywood cinemas of the past and the modern, increasingly high-concept, blockbuster-driven cinemas of the 1990s and 2000s. Twenty plus years of constant filmmaking only served to help Scorsese further hone his craft, which, for our purposes, means the latter films of the study blend the gangster and Western genres in far more intricate ways. For instance, *GoodFellas*, the first of the latter trio, *is* a gangster film, and is structured around the rise and fall of Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), our protagonist, who *is* a gangster.

However, like Charlie and JR before him, Henry is a man in the middle, forever outside the Cicero family due to his father's heritage, and takes the mediator role throughout the film. Perhaps most importantly, he serves as a mediator to the audience, deciding who we will meet, what to explain to us and even mediating our interpretation of what we see. Like Charlie, he is banished, not killed; a fitting punishment for a man who "always wanted to be a gangster." Further, like the Western, the film is set at the end of an era, at the moment in mob history when the 'frontier' began to close, and a way of life (and the relative freedoms) that gangsters of the past had enjoyed was coming to an end.

Karen (Lorraine Bracco), for her part, is not shown to be the gangster's moll. Instead, I argue that the way in which the film positions her more closely aligns with the Western woman, albeit with some important critiques and challenges. Like Johnny Boy, Tommy (Joe Pesci)

typifies the gangster figure, and links him to the Western savage. Tommy and Henry's closeness is explored, particularly their mirrored psychopathy, which, as we will note, Henry goes to a great deal of effort to mediate/hide his from the audience, while Tommy embraces his savage/outlaw role wholeheartedly. That it is Tommy who returns for the now famous homage to *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), one of the first cinematic Westerns and itself "something of a turn-of-the-century gangster film" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 46), further blurs the line between the two, suitably obfuscating any attempts to fully extricate gangster from Westerner in the film.

*Casino*, perhaps superficially considered 'Scorsese's Western' due to its 2.35:1 Widescreen aspect ratio and American West settings, in many ways serves as the site in which the gangster film and the Western "coexist as part of the same surface" (Reed & Thompson). Like *GoodFellas*, the film typifies the gangster film's rise-and-fall structure, while positioning itself at the end of an era, the point at which the frontier closes. Nicky (Joe Pesci) once again serves as the gangster/savage figure, Ace (Robert De Niro) as the outsider/mediator, who ultimately ends the film in banishment, but the two exists with a symbiotic closeness not seen in the other films. Indeed, as their situations become more and more untenable, they begin to switch roles; Nicky mediates more and more between Ace and Ginger (Sharon Stone) while Ace's latent gangsterisms rise to the surface, culminating with his calling for Nicky's murder. While Ginger, the quintessential gangster's moll, (who, paradoxically, is most appealing to Ace, at the height of his being positioned as a Westerner) is often seen as a catalyst for the collapse, by charting the gangster/Westerner role reversals of Nicky and Ace, I argue that the film structurally reminds its viewer that, as in the Western, the men's relationship is the emotional core of the film.

*Casino* is the only film in the study (save *Taxi Driver*) that does not contain the community dance ritual, suggesting that no community depicted in the film is worth saving, and

is the only film to contain 'actual' cowboys. However, just as the gangster and Westerner sides of Ace and Nicky become indistinguishable from one another, the cowboy hats and bolo ties only barely mask the wearers gangster mannerisms; backroom deals, cronyism, and threats only thinly concealed behind a smile.

If *Casino* exists as the site where the gangster and the Westerner are so inextricably combined, it is the last film in this study, *Gangs of New York*, that is perhaps the clearest example of Western structures and foundations beneath the gangster facade. Embodying what Leslie Fielder calls the "disguised Western" (355), the film cleanly and succinctly translates the Classic Hollywood Western, in both narrative and aesthetic style, to the ultimate American urban center, New York City, and the gangster milieux with which the director's name had, by this point, become synonymous.

From its outset, the film's frontier town inspired set design consciously recalls look of the Wild West. Its 1860s setting makes contemporaries of Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio) and the stable of later Hollywood Westerners, including Ethan Edwards, and the Draft Riots function to anchor *Gangs* not only at the meeting place between civilization and savagery, but at a very specific moment in the American past, (corresponding to the Western's Civil War era time period) when options were still available, but rapidly closing, when savagery was still very much a part of the landscape, but implicitly understood to be ceding ground for a new democratic 'American Way'.

Bill (Daniel Day Lewis), literally the 'Native American', is the most explicit linking of Western savage and gangster figure, yet, unlike most Westerns, he succeeds in portraying the Indian figure as a meaningful alternative to the way of life which the Westerner (here: Amsterdam) ultimately chooses. Certainly, Amsterdam is a man in the middle, an insider made outsider in the neighborhood, excluded from Bill's Nativists and American society as whole due to his heritage, and caught between the savagery of the gangs and the neighborhood, and the

great future that adherence to American law and order promises to provide. Further, his choice between good and bad 'father figure' characters reflects the 'initiate hero' pattern common in the late Westerns of the 1950s and 60s. Indeed, while *Gangs* presents world governed by a code of honor, this code is neither native to Amsterdam nor is it personally derived; it is through his journey, and his relationship with both father figures, and the Points inhabitants, that he learns to adhere to the code and adopt it as his own.

Certainly, Jenny's (Cameron Diaz) journey most clearly echoes that of many Western women; initially a self reliant prostitute who more or less shares the hero's way of life (Warshow 138), through her bond with the hero, which includes nursing him back to health after an initial brush with the villain (Cawelti 72), she is more and more contained until she ends the film 'reformed' into society, but lacking all freedom and independence she once enjoyed. However, in return, she also "takes the place of his masculine comrades" (Cawelti 42). As in the Western, Jenny, fully morphed from the dancehall girl to the good Western woman, offers Amsterdam a 'way out', which he, like Westerners before him, can take only after settling the score with the male challenger. After which, the films assure us, the Westerner and his woman are on their way to a settled life.

Even the film's final dissolves seem to comment on the Westerner's penchant for 'riding off into the sunset.' Instead of the implicit understanding that the audience knows what comes after, here we watch "the cowboy's distant fears" dissolve into "the gangster's daily angst" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85) as the skyline expands to reflect its shape in the first couple of years of the 21st century. With the final image including the outline of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, missing from the city's skyline for a little over a year by the film's release, *Gangs* invites the viewer to critique the essential benevolence of American progress (Cawelti 53), perhaps more overtly, but very much echoing the sentiment of the late Westerns that came before it.

Because Scorsese was never so overtly "revisionist" as were many of his peers, I must reiterate that my purpose here is not to argue that the films in question strictly align with only one set of generic rituals, or that they belong to one genre at the exclusion of the other, nor am I trying to suggest that *all* of Scorsese's gangster films follow a Western framework (for instance, *The Departed* is certainly outside this Western paradigm). To do so would miss the intricacies of the ways in which Scorsese is blending the two genres within his work, and defeat the purpose of this study altogether.

My goal here is to offer a new vantage point from which to appreciate the films. It is a testament to Scorsese's skill as a filmmaker, and evidence of his love and appreciation of the medium in which he works that his texts are so layered, and in far more subtle and nuanced ways than those of peers who self-consciously aimed to "revise" genres. Although it is impossible to say whether or not there was a conscious intention on Scorsese's part that informed his decision-making processes while creating these films, it is reasonable to suppose that, as a life-long student and devotee of film, particularly Westerns, he may have, even accidentally or subconsciously, transposed generic rituals and structures from the Western into many of his gangster films, given the deep rooted similarities between the two genres. That these two genres become more and more integrated with one another with each subsequent entry shows not only a director honing his craft, but further illustrates Toby Reed and RJ Thompson's assertion that "the Western cannot be separated from the gangster film." As I hope to prove, if there is any filmmaker whose work exemplifies that claim, it is Martin Scorsese.

## Who's That Knocking at My Door

Scorsese's first feature, *Who's That Knocking at My Door,* provides a logical starting point for our exploration, as it tackles the Western themes in a combination of awkwardly overt and sublimely subtle manners. Initially conceived and undertaken as Scorsese's master's thesis film at NYU, the film subsequently underwent a series of expansions and reconfigurations, constructed from a shooting schedule cobbled together over many years, when time and money facilitated. The film was exhibited under a variety of titles and runtimes throughout the mid-to-late 1960s, before the version bearing the current title was released commercially by Joseph Brenner Associates in 1967. The resulting film is perhaps best understood, to paraphrase Robin Wood, as a 'patchwork text,' whose occasional incoherence and contradictions are best explained by the sporadic production schedule and the director's inexperience rather than intention. Coupled with a loose, flashback narrative structure that owes more to *Breathless* (1960) and the French New Wave than straightforward Classical Hollywood three-act storytelling, the requisite viewings appropriate for analytical insight might stretch the patience of all but the most motivated.

Likely because of this, the film is often overlooked in critical and scholarly discussions of Scorsese's work. But to dismiss it as merely the work of an amateur learning his craft is to negate the powerful subject and skill already present. Likewise, to see it as a rough draft of *Mean Streets* overlooks the fundamental differences between the two films and their protagonists, JR and Charlie (both played by Harvey Keitel). For our purposes, *Knocking* bears discussion here, as it consistently, thoroughly and purposefully frames its protagonist as a static character whose unbending adherence to his personal code of honor places him at odds with the contemporary society in which he finds himself— the epitome of a late Western hero.

Briefly, the story centers on JR's inability to deal with the revelation that the Girl (Zina Berthune) with whom he is in love was raped, and is, therefore, is not a virgin. Despite his best attempts, he cannot overcome his stringent Madonna/Whore complex, and so has no other way of understanding and contextualizing her outside of a 'fallen woman.' Within his stringent code, there are no grey areas; her lack of virginity clearly places her in the category of "not someone you marry." The problem is that he has already fallen in love with her, which forces him to evaluate the importance of his unwavering personal set of values.

Told in a very non-linear fashion, scenes of JR wasting time with his neighborhood pals give way to flashbacks of time spent with the Girl in such a way that, with very few exceptions, the viewer is not meant to discern their exact chronological relation to one another, until the film's final sequence. Still drunk from the night before, JR returns to the Girl's apartment, and announces that he will "forgive [her]" and "marry [her] anyway." It is an offer she rightly rejects. Knowing that he'd "always find a way to bring it up," she pleads with him to "go home." While the next shot finds him in the Church, surrounded by suffering Pieta statues, the film ultimately ends cyclically, in the street, suggesting that, just as the Western hero, JR is "deeply troubled and obviously doomed" (Warshow 146) to repeat his struggle time and time again.

While it might seem that the film contextualizes this issue as a religious issue, it is clear that JR's problem (and his inability to rectify it) stems from his emulation of his onscreen Western heroes. In fact, the entire film could serve as an illustration of "the ways the film version of reality warps the consciousness of those without sufficient detachment" (Braudy), such is JR's determination to become "a rejected man of virtue" (Warshow 149) in the Western sense. The connection here is anything but subtle; nearly every conversation JR shares with the Girl consists mainly of him chattering on about his favorite Western films with a near childlike enthusiasm. When not marveling at the meanness and violence of the antagonists in *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), he takes her to the theatre to see

*Rio Bravo* (1959). This is so much a part of their courtship that, if the Girl is to be believed that she has "not seen many John Wayne pictures," it begs the question of where the commonality in the relationship sufficient enough to entertain a marriage proposal lies.

Scorsese strengthens JR's connection to the Westerner at the film's midpoint, falling roughly around the journey to Copake. Certainly, the sequence functions as counterpoint to the grimy, constricting, urban environment of Little Italy, very clearly associating JR with the (surrogate) frontier wilderness; the rolling hills, fallen leaves, thick forests and threats of snakes serve as the closest incarnation of the mythic onscreen American West this John Wayne-obsessed city boy has ever encountered. However its relevance to the overall narrative is often called into question, since it arguably only exists so that JR and Joey (Lennard Kuras) can hike up a hill.

But it is on that hilltop where JR experiences a transcendent moment, likely the first of his life, "in that 'pure and quiet light such as the [City] never sees'… [outside of] civilization and its artificial traditions" (Cawelti 70). Meanwhile Joey, the neighborhood friend, complains the whole way up and is thoroughly unimpressed upon reaching the summit. As we will discuss later in more detail, despite Scorsese's biography and the ubiquity of Catholic imagery in the film, JR is not presented as an especially spiritual young man, so there is little justification for an overtly religious interpretation of the moment. Rather, this almost Thoreauvian reverence reflects a depiction of nature, "not [as] simply a savage wilderness, but a land where the inner spirit of men counts more than the surface manners and attitudes of civilization" (Cawelti 69) common in many Westerns.

As Cawelti notes, "in such a setting, a man must prove his worth by actions" (69) and at this point in the film, JR believes himself to have done just that. Like his Western heroes before him, he has "assert[ed] his personal value" (Warshow 143) in his strict and unbending adherence to his personal code of honor, and has been rewarded with the educated, seemingly

virtuous girlfriend worthy of a man demonstrating such restraint and personal discipline. In this moment then, having ostensibly ascended into the pantheon of successful Westerners, JR is finally able to share in the Westerner's understanding that "despite the appearance of wildness… this landscape is the place where deep truths of human nature and life, overlaid in the East by the artifices and corruptions of civilization, can be discovered anew" (Cawelti 69).

Of course, according to JR's very narrowly defined definition, the Girl is not 'virtuous' and it is in the very next scene in which she reveals to him that she was raped. Despite the film's somewhat loose, circular flashback structure, the chronology of these two scenes is expressly clear; the Girl opens the conversation by mentioning that she "hear[d he] climbed a mountain," directly referencing the previous scene. This is perhaps the only instance in the film in which the viewer is so explicitly made to understand the direct order of events in neighboring scenes, emphasizing the importance of their proximal relationship. This overt insistence on the precise ordering of these events recalls the Westerner's "tragedy [which] lies in the fact that even this circumscribed demand cannot be fully realized" (Warshow 143). As Warshow explains, the Westerner's code is, by design, impractical, unrealistic and unattainable; indeed, as soon as JR believes himself rewarded for a strict devotion to his code, the film immediately undermines him.

Viewing JR as a self-consciously constructed Western hero is perhaps the most appropriate way in which to contextualize another notorious, seemingly incongruent scene within the narrative: the nude sexual fantasy, cut to The Doors' "The End." When it is mentioned in other writings, it usually serves as evidence of the film's piecemeal schedule and amateur nature, but critics and scholars alike seem to shy away from trying to explain its existence any other way than by qualifying that it was shot years later, in Amsterdam, to meet Brenner's demand for nudity in order to receive distribution. I do not mean to argue that such contextualization is not necessary. Certainly, the scene is far more religious in theme and

imagery; JR is nothing if not a Christ figure as he is sacrificially offered to the girls, in overtly spiritual imagery that does not appear anywhere else in the film. This is no doubt due to having been designed and constructed by a more mature filmmaker some years down the road, and so such historical anecdotes are helpful to note.

However, if the scene existed solely as an exploitation-inspired flesh show, it could have been edited in anywhere. As it is, Scorsese inserts it directly, perhaps even violently, into the middle of a debate between JR and the Girl over Feathers' (Angie Dickinson) virtue in *Rio Bravo,* purposefully reconnecting the scene to JR's Western infatuation. In this short, heavily stylized scene, we get the condensed version of what it also takes the entire film to say. This is JR's conscious rejection of the civilization's "values" (i.e. the sex, drugs and rock n roll, all very clearly coded by the girls' "mod" haircuts and the countercultural, psychedelic song on the soundtrack, that have become the values of the modern, young culture of which JR potentially could be a member[1]) to "defend… the purity of his own image - in fact, his honor" (Warshow 140). And it is *his* image, *his* honor that he is concerned with.

Despite his initial (if reluctant) acceptance of the debauchery he imagines modern life to offer, he ends the sequence purposefully and absolutely rejecting such values. Clothed, standing above the nude woman in bed, JR is a position of power for the first time since the scene began. Striking a pose that directly mimics John Wayne's shooting stance from the promotional images that make up the preceding montage, he 'shoots' the Feathers surrogate with a deck of playing cards, forsaking her (modern, free and loose) way of life. Whether or not the girls in the fantasy are literal prostitutes is not important; within JR's code, the fantasy mod girls, Feathers, and the Girl all lack virginity. They are all "broads," and therefore, interchangeable, one in the same. More than anything else in the film, this is his ride into the

[1] Grist notes that "the film's [commercial] failure has… been attributed to it being historically 'out of step'" (43).

sunset. Like the Western hero, he is not a helpless victim of circumstances and changing times, he is a man purposefully rejecting a contemporary culture whose values run counter to his own, even if it is he who will be banished as a result.

The savage, "the second most important character role in the Western" (Cawelti 34), traditionally the Indian or outlaw role, here belongs to the young men of the neighborhood. In innumerable interviews, Scorsese has likened the neighborhood in which he grew up, the same neighborhood in which the film was set and shot, to a "provincial [Sicilian] village" (Schickel 70), implying a kind of tribal, primitive way of life, and indeed, the film places JR's pals, and importantly, some aspects of his own personality, in a distinctly savage light. The film opens on a street brawl, and we are introduced to Joey as he publicly humiliates Sally Gaga (Michael Scala), physically and verbally abusing him. Later, Gaga steals $40 from his date, only to 'generously' gift her $5 (of her own bills) for cab fare when she realizes her money is gone. JR and Joey nearly come to blows over the volume of the car radio and make a game of cramming wet napkins into each other's faces and drinks. Certainly, they are the native inhabitants of the neighborhood, and, in the absence of any older adult presence, (save JR's mother's [Catherine Scorsese] brief appearance in the opening credits sequence) they are its rulers; in their savagery, they are only concerned with enforcing the *absence* of law and order.

Of course, it is in those aimless drives, late night parties and impromptu rendezvous that the guys also embody "certain positive values which are restricted or destroyed by advancing civilization: the freedom and spontaneity of wilderness life… and the deep camaraderie of men untrammeled by domestic ties" (34) that Cawelti sees as the constructive functions of the savage role.

On the surface, JR's code of honor separates him from their more brutal lawlessness. He does not actively participate in either Joey's attack or the street brawl, the latter of which he laughingly backs away from, and he is often alone in the frame, even when surrounded by the

gang, staring into the distance, remembering the tranquility and civility he enjoyed while with the Girl. (Indeed, JR's central conflict for much of *Knocking* follows "the classic [Western] configuration of the anarchic world of Male Savagery pitted against the civilized world of Woman and Home" [Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 51].)

However, like his Western heroes, whose familiarity with primitive living precludes their full acceptance into society, JR is not nearly as removed from his peers as he would like to think. Despite his solitary framing and emotional remove during some of the more tame misbehavior, he not only initiates the argument over the order in which the gang will take turns sleeping with the "broads" that Gaga has rounded up, but escalates it; bursting into the room to break up the occasion when he feels he is unfairly cheated out of of his place in that order. It is JR, then, that is the driving force behind what is often seen as the most savage and disturbing sequence in the film. Many critics focus on the sexual aspects, noting the scene's position in relation to JR's breakup with the Girl, and "the proposed shared, if sequential, sex, with its semantic intimations of 'having sex together' [and] the storming of the bedrooms… [which effectively] reasserts the group's male exclusivity" (Grist 37). However, when viewed through a Western lens, it also functions as proof that the essential savagery inherent in the Western hero, a savagery which both facilitates his success on the frontier and justifies his eventual removal from the civilized society, is also present in JR.

Without this scene, JR's code simply prescribes a binary categorization of women; the worst consequence of which is that he suffers some emotional distress. With it, the implicit savagery in his code is made express: the categories in which the women are placed determines the way they are treated. Just like the Westerner, whose code of honor is responsible for keeping his savagery in check until it is 'useful,' JR had earlier retreated from anything too sexual with the Girl, based on how she fit into his code. But here, with the "broads" over whom his code has no jurisdiction, his own savagery takes control. It is pertinent to note

that the feature length version of the film was initially released under the title *I Call First*, a phrase taken from JR's dialog in this scene. (Indeed, it was *I Call First* that Roger Ebert viewed and was so taken by at the 1967 Chicago Film Festival.) This seems to suggest that the scene contains something essential to our overall understanding to the film and of JR's character, and in fact, this is the only scene in the picture which shows him to be capable of a vicious, cruel savagery on par with — perhaps even exceeding — that of his friends.

This savage part of the Westerner's nature, of course, is responsible for his iconic 'ride into the sunset', for "in doing so, he reaffirms his own basic incompatibility with the community's values" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57). While there is no explicit 'sunset' moment in *Knocking,* JR's code (with all of its implicit savageness) serves as the basis for his 'basic incompatibility' with the Girl and the modern values of the incoming civilization she represents.

Interestingly, for all their savagery, it is at the gang's first party, a series of over-cranked pans dissolving into the next, set to Ray Baretto's "El Watusi," that Scorsese seems to consciously evoke the Western's 'community dance' ritual. What was originally intended to display the burgeoning Western frontier town as "community worth saving" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 137), confirming the necessity of the Western's eventual violence, is here clearly and purposefully corrupted. The 'community' is a community of savages, and almost certainly not worth saving. What starts as a friendly gathering between the neighborhood's young men almost immediately devolves here into a dominance ritual, complete with phallic symbolism, as one party guest pulls a gun to Gaga's head, throwing him around the room as the others laugh maniacally. The overtones of desperation, frustration and anger that pervade the sequence, culminating in the unprovoked eruption of violence among the exclusively male attendees seem to condemn, rather than justify, JR's actions and decisions. In a traditional Western, although the hero is "fundamentally committed to the townspeople" (Cawelti 29) who populate the dance, he must eventually leave them. JR, meanwhile, seems to spend the film in (varying degrees of)

opposition to the people at *Knocking*'s dance, yet in the end, does not leave them. As Grist observes, his relationship with his male friends survives the film, while his relationship with the Girl does not (37).

These recontextualized community dances appear in all the gangster films in this study aside from *Casino*, and while each is used in a way that uniquely comments on the individual film in which it is contained, thus precluding any overarching meaning behind them, their presence alone is enough to strengthen a Western reading, as they are a ritual that does not appear in other (non-musical) films.

Even the Girl can be seen as both aligning with and recontextualizing Western female roles. Certainly, in Westerns, the woman symbolizes a settling, domestic influence, and here the Girl seems to stand for anything but that. However, Cawelti argues that "women are [also] primary symbols of civilization in the Western. It is the schoolmarm even more than the entrepreneur who symbolically represents the end of the old wilderness life" (30), and the Girl is certainly a harbinger of a new way of life. She is an independent, modern woman who keeps her own apartment, filled with "jazz records, lack of a television and art prints [that] sustain the sense of her bourgeois taste and upbringing" (Grist 40). Her (relatively) spacious, modern building, with crisp white walls, sterile hallways and clean elevators stands in direct contrast to the cramped, worn tenement where JR resides. Thought the film does not spend much time on it, JR notably lives with his mother, suggesting a more antiquated family dynamic and culture, which strengthens the neighborhood-as-savage analogy, for Westerns often present "the Indian way of life as an inferior and earlier stage in the development of civilization" (Cawelti 22).

Given their similarities, it is not surprising that the Girl identifies with Feathers, the "sympathetic, intelligent modern woman in an antiquated, all-exclusive male setting" (Wernblad 26) of *Rio Bravo*. For as much as JR writes off women like Feathers as "broads," Robert B. Ray notes that the Westerner often "sought only uncompromising relationships, involving either a

'bad' woman (whose morals deprived her of all rights to entangling domesticity) or other males (who themselves remained independent)" (60), suggesting, counter-intuitively, that the Girl is exactly the kind of woman JR should be with. Indeed, even Feathers, who, as a drinking, gambling, cheating saloon girl, typifies nearly every avenue in which a woman could be corrupted, is still converted, or 'saved' by the hero, who, by the end, deems her marriage material. It is clear JR expects similar results when he shows up offering to "marry [her] anyway."

Yet, by the end of *Knocking*, she is not confined in marriage. In fact, she is positioned to have a greater freedom and mobility in the world than JR; moving forward, it is she, not he, who will have access to the "physical [and social] freedom… belong[ing] to the… openness of the West" (Warshow 139). By refusing his qualified offer of marriage, she "fights… to state what [s]he is, and [to] live in a world which permits that statement" (141), epitomizing that which Warshow considers to be the Westerner's foundational motivation. Indeed, it is she who, in the couple's final words to each other, commands JR to "go home," both banishing him to the domestic, and evoking Ethan Edwards' final words in *The Searchers*. But, whereas Edwards' invitation home positively resolves the psychological anxiety provoked by the second half of his quest, the Girl's commandment is a dismissal; a condemnation to a world devoid of any domestic civility.

Of course, as Grist points out (40), it also recalls an earlier *Searchers* scene as well, one in which JR describes in length during his and the Girl's first meeting, in which Debbie implores Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) to "go home" and allow her to stay with her tribe, now her family. While Martin and Ethan do not heed that request, JR does, returning to his neighborhood and his 'tribe'.

JR does make one stop off before returning to his pals, however, as the next sequence catches him in confession, among the Pieta statues and Catholic icons of suffering. While it

might be going too far to suggest that this is *Knocking*'s 'ride into the sunset' moment, inasmuch as any scene in the film can be said to demonstrate a similar impetus, this is it. Narratively, JR's situation echoes the Westerner's at the iconic moment; he has just been forced to remove himself, permanently, from the encroaching modern civilization (as symbolized by the Girl), "reaffirm[ing] his own basic incompatibility with the [civilized] community's values" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57) as a result of the more primal, tribal, savage side of himself. As he rides away, the Westerner is headed into the frontier, the savage environment that will allow for (and, in fact, demand) the expression of that which fundamentally precluded him from the town, and here, JR is on his way to accepting and resigning himself to a savage existence among the neighborhood natives. Further, as Schatz notes, the genre "send[s] the Westerner 'into the sunset' after the requisite showdown" (*Hollywood Genres* 52) and this scene, falling directly after the climactic showdown with the Girl, is the only such time we see him in such an overtly religious setting.

As I have previously mentioned, JR is not portrayed as an especially religious or spiritual young man. His "cinematically founded relationship with the Girl informs his cross-cultural dilemma" (Grist 41), not any religious beliefs he may (or may not) have. His insistence on the Girl's chastity is a ritual stemming from his onscreen Western heroes, rather than from spiritual interests. There is nothing to indicate he holds dear any other aspect of the Church's teachings; he does not seem especially concerned with right and wrong, salvation, sacrifice or guilt. He does not fear Catholic punishment, quote scriptures nor idolize saints, as Charlie does later. He does not justify his rejection of her by blaming the Church's teachings, instead he admits that he is "old fashioned." It is *his* personal value system that her 'fallen' status violates, not one imposed by external forces.

Certainly, female roles in Westerns can be delineated between fallen and virtuous, just as in traditional religious culture, so there is natural overlap. Focusing the conflict on the Girl's

chastity is somewhat logical, as it might be the only issue an East Coast Italian Catholic and a Western hero would have in common. JR is unlikely to ever encounter marauding bands of Indians, either in Manhattan or Copake, nor will he ever be called upon to save his community.

However, when reading Scorsese's career "diachronically (the films in their context) rather than synchronically" (Raymond, "Multiplicity"), the Catholic elements of *Knocking* become much less pronounced. JR's spirituality, then, appears to be needlessly exaggerated in order to better fit into a narrative written years later, informed more by Scorsese's own biographical anecdotes and interviews explaining his own motivations for making the picture than by what is actually onscreen. Although the Madonna and Child statuette is prominently positioned in the bedroom during the aborted make-out session, JR does not so much as even look at it, suggesting his discomfort in the situation does not stem from Catholicism. Certainly, this Church sequence is filled with purposefully staged and framed iconography. Some, like the eyes of Santa Lucia, "Sicily's most important female saint" (Keyser 26), who, according to some tellings, carved out her own eyes rather than marry, relate directly to the film's plot. Yet others, such as JR's bloody kissing of the crucifix, are, as Roger Ebert declares, "awkwardly contrived" (19). Even Scorsese has often expressed some embarrassment about the way the film turned out reiterating that this is, like all first features, an inherently uneven work. Nevertheless, the appearance of a handful of Catholic iconography in a film set in a cloistered Sicilian neighborhood should not be given equal weight, nor supersede the multiple formal and narrative connections indicating the deeper impact of Westerners on JR's personality. If Catholic theology had a hand in forming his moral code, he seems to have moved beyond it now. (Indeed, perhaps the awkwardness Ebert noticed in the above-mentioned scene could be seen as demonstrating JR's general unease in such a formally religious setting.)

I do not argue, then, that the film is bereft of Catholic imagery, but rather that this imagery functions as a backdrop, a landscape for JR's milieux, much like the Western plains

and the vistas of Monument Valley. “Ford’s landscape is indeed a symbolic one,” Cawelti notes, suggesting that in his Westerns, the director “uses the great isolated monoliths of Monument Valley to… reflect the basic uncertainty and ambiguity of human existence… [and] project something much more richly enigmatic… than evangelical mysticism [or] moral allegory” (90). Just as the frontier visually represents a “threatening savagery” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 26) and the “self reliant individuality” (75), so too do the mutilated, disembodied limbs and organs of the statues serve as symbols of a contradictory environment in which savagery and civility are equally pondered. (After all, both the Church and the frontier serve as backdrops for mythic stories of good and evil.)

And just as in the most iconic Westerns, these monuments, be they massive sandstone towers or more literal icons of suffering, surround and envelop the hero at the film’s end as he departs ‘into the sunset.’ Amongst the Pieta and the pews, the penultimate sequence situates JR in Church imagery as one might expect Ford to photograph his Western hero on the horizon of the plains or desert, immediately following his removal from civilization, having accepted his savagery, and en route to rejoining the “masculine honor and camaraderie of the old wilderness life” (Cawelti 31).

Given the flashback structure, and the constant close-ups of padlocks, deadbolts and closing car windows, there is little question how the film will end. Therefore, the interest does not lie in whether or not JR can overcome the Girl’s loss of virginity, the audience watches to see when and *how* he will realize he cannot. Just as the later Western hero he so strives to emulate, “he has judged his own failure and has already assimilated it, understanding that he can do nothing but play out the drama of the gunfight [in this case, the breakup] over and over again” (Warshow 146). (In fact, the entire film can be read as his personal replay.) The melancholy tone of the Church sequence, and the following street scene suggests that he, like the Westerner, “purposefully end[s the film] in a fashion that [he] could control, and that the

audience has come to expect" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57). That is, he is as likely to end up with the Girl as Ethan Edwards, or Shane (Alan Ladd) or any Western hero is to settle down in the frontier community.

While fans and critics are not necessarily wrong to read Catholic parallels into JR's plight, there is as much, if not more, evidence in the film to that seems to position JR's doomed trajectory as aligning with Scorsese's other obsession: the Western. Despite the director's own insistence that *Knocking* served as a mere run though for *Mean Streets*, the earlier film is far more overt in its Western connotations and indebtedness. As we shall see, while *Mean Streets* does position its protagonist as a Western hero, it introduces a gangster double, and is far more concerned with Catholicism and the question of living morally in an immoral word. For JR, such questions are inconsequential; for him, the solution to all problems can be found by watching Westerns.

## Mean Streets

If the Catholic iconography is shown to be little more than a landscape or a milieu to JR, the opposite is true of Charlie (Harvey Keitel). More mature and comfortable with his position in life, especially with his standing in the neighborhood and with his friends, Charlie is portrayed as a very spiritual man, constantly troubled by the choice between right and wrong, obsessing over punishment and guilt. He is a believer, seemingly the only one in his neighborhood who took to heart the exaggerated cautionary tales told by youth retreat priests. His desire for penance and his concern with suffering and sacrifice, reinforced by a ritualistic finger-to-the-flame, inform his actions throughout. Scorsese has claimed that "the whole idea was to make a story about a modern saint, a saint in his own society, but his society happens to be gangsters" (Grist 76).

And, like JR before him, Charlie loves Westerns. While he does not wear his obsession on his sleeve quite as prominently as does his predecessor, he names both John Wayne and St Francis of Assisi as his heroes. Certainly, just as in *Knocking*, the Western's presence can be felt over the film, this time in more narratively integrated ways than overt discussions of Lee Marvin's villainy or the plot of *The Searchers.* In fact, the Westerner is arguably more influential in shaping Charlie and *Mean Streets* than it was JR: Ethan Edwards, *The Searchers*' fictional protagonist, is credited as co-screenwriter on an initial draft of the screenplay.

At this early point in the film's development, the script, then titled *Season of the Witch,* contains a much more overtly autobiographical narrative. The version of Charlie who appears in *Season of the Witch* is a much more of a thinly veiled Scorsese substitute than the version of the character who would appear in the *Mean Streets*-titled film, embodying many more explicitly Scorsesian traits, down to the director's well-noted fear of flying. This credit, while surely a cinephilic in-joke between Scorsese and actual co-writer Mardik Martin, also suggests that Charlie is informed at least as much by John Wayne's fictional Western character as he is by

Scorsese's biographical experiences. Concurrently, by crediting a Hollywood Western character with partial authorship of *his* onscreen surrogate, Scorsese both confirms the Western influence over *Mean Streets* and over himself, and reinforces the notion that "genre films… project an idealized cultural self image" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 33).

Indeed, despite JR's multiple enthusiastic Western harangues, it is *Mean Streets* that literally absorbs *The Searchers*, blending the celluloid imagery from the earlier film with Scorsese's own footage and story. Interestingly, the scene shown, a fight between Charlie McCurty (Ken Curtis) and Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), was originally envisioned in the *Season of the Witch* script to be the *Donovan's Reef* (1963) bar fight scene between John Wayne's and Lee Marvin's characters (Scorsese, et al.). While it is far beyond the scope of this study to dissect the possible psychological implications behind Scorsese's decision to show a fight between characters named *Charlie* and *Martin* in this film, the fact that *Donovan's Reef,* itself a John Ford/John Wayne/Frank Nugent collaboration, was swapped for arguably their most famous Western further signals the latent foundational Western influences at work in *Mean Streets*.

Again, my purpose in this study is not to suggest that, for the films in question, Scorsese consciously attempted to squeeze a gangster picture into a Western mold. However, the above instances function as fairly overt, if subconscious, indications (and admissions) of the film's Western antecedents, long before Scorsese could have imagined scholars and critics would be scrutinizing his work to such a level of detail.

Certainly, Charlie is positioned as a man in the middle, his "fundamental values in a state of sustained conflict" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 27) in nearly every facet of his life. He "shares that typical posture of the Western hero: a situation of divided commitment[s]" (Cawelti 35), stuck between Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro) and uncle Giovanni (Cesare Danova), Johnny and Teresa (Amy Robinson), Johnny and Michael (Richard Romanus); between his desire to

stay in the neighborhood, “helping,” and his desire to leave and start a new life with Teresa, and between his Catholic convictions and the wider secular reality that surrounds him, especially as it pertains to the neighborhood ‘lifestyle.’ His middle man status is codified and accepted within the neighborhood; both Johnny and Michael implore him to involve Giovanni as Johnny’s debt grows increasingly out of control, suggesting that Charlie is an integral part (indeed, the only way) of reaching the head of the neighborhood.

Even beyond the gang’s immediate corner of the city, Charlie is recruited to settle a discrepancy between Jimmy (Lenny Scaletta) and Joey (George Memmoli). His comfort in the foreign setting of Joey’s pool hall, and the good humor (at least, initially) with which he is able to joke with Joey’s friends indicates not only the frequency at which Charlie is called upon to mediate, but his natural talent in the position. It is clearly a role he relishes. Down to the most insignificant frictions, such as Michael’s reaction to the gay couple climbing into his car or Teresa’s disrespect to the black hotel maid, Charlie almost subconsciously leaps in to smooth things over. As Johnny mockingly points out, Charlie does expend a great deal of effort making sure that “everybody likes Charlie.”

Most strikingly, even the formation of Charlie’s code of honor can be understood as an attempt to mediate the tenets of Catholicism into a more enjoyable, and, as we shall see, self-serving, set of actions. Having just rejected a more typical absolution, he attributes Johnny’s sudden arrival as a reminder from God, reminding himself that “we play by [God’s] rules, don’t we? Well, don’t we?” Yet the rest of the films shows Charlie doing anything and everything in his power *not* to play by God’s rules, instead constructing substitute reparations in hopes of achieving a similar result.

Of course, each of the more narratively pertinent conflicts can be distilled down and made to reflect the Westerner’s basic conflict between civilization and savagery. As we will analyze in more depth later, Johnny, in his misplaced anger and aimless aggression, is easily

interpreted through the savage role; Giovanni, with his ability to both set and enforce the neighborhood's laws, and Teresa's feminine presence, typically "associated with family, home and community" (Cawelti 152), both represent different aspects the Westerner's 'civilization'. Like the Westerner before him, Charlie's equally strong ties to each inform his "basic incompatibility with the community's values" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57) and are partially responsible for his removal from it.

The Westerner's unbending adherence to a personal code of honor likewise informs his 'basic incompatibility' and helps to facilitate his removal, and we see this situation echoed with Charlie, whose religiosity and attempts to live according to Catholic teachings and values set him apart from seemingly every other member of the neighborhood, who appear to be surrounded by Catholic iconography yet impervious to its message. But while Scorsese often explains *Mean Streets*' conflict in terms of "living morally in an amoral world" (Schickel 103), a closer examination reveals Charlie's code to be less about morals, and more about fulfilling personal needs. Indeed, this was not a penance externally assigned by Church authority, but rather one he chose for himself. Explaining why he does not accept the standard penance the priest assigns, Charlie insists, "it just doesn't work for *me*. I do something wrong, I just want to make up for it *my* way, so I do my own penance for my own sins." Clearly, this is not the Church's code.

Instead, by rejecting the prescriptions of institutionalized law and order and substituting his own, Charlie's expiational devotion to 'saving' a wayward friend now "gives full weight to individual honor" and reflects the Westerner's code, whose "fundamental principles of honor… transcend the official agencies of government and the codified, written law" (Cawelti 70-1). Charlie's insistence on a personalized penance both reaffirms the Western's essential individualistic values and places him squarely within the genre's vigilantism tradition; just as many Western heroes were reluctantly forced to "act because society is too weak to do so"

(Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57), Charlie was implicitly forced to take on a stronger penance because the "10 Hail Marys, 10 Our Fathers, 10 whatever" that the priest assigned were not strong enough to fully absolve his sins. (Certainly not his sin of pride.)

Of course, Charlie's code differs from that of the typical Western hero, since his personal code governs not only his own behavior, but fundamentally requires controlling Johnny's actions as well. This, of course, is almost certainly doomed to fail from the outset, as this is a role that Johnny did not ask for and does not want, suggesting that, like the Westerner, Charlie "has judged his own failure and has already assimilated it" (Warshow 146). (Indeed, it is Charlie's inability to cease his attempts at controlling Johnny that leads to his decisively Western outcome, as we will discuss later.)

Johnny, for his part, is not unaware of the self-serving motivation behind Charlie's actions. As Annette Wernblad notes, "the more [Charlie] tries to force him into being respectable, the more Johnny acts up" (31), suggesting that his increasingly erratic and dangerous behavior is designed to remove himself from a role that Charlie circumscribed for him, and from which only Charlie will benefit. Certainly, any attempt to distill such a intricate relationship into a simple cause-and-effect explanation is to do a disservice to the nuances of the performances and writing; this is an an extremely complicated friendship. But while Charlie does earnestly care about Johnny and his well-being, his love only masks the fact that he is guilty of near-compulsively manipulating his friend, spending much of his time explicitly working *against* his friend's wishes, for inherently selfish reasons.

Although such self-centeredness might be seen as distorting the Westerner's code of honor, it is not without precedent. Indeed, in many ways it mirrors the central tension of *The Searchers,* reiterating the earlier film's influence in *Mean Streets*' creation. Ethan Edwards did not initially intend to save Debbie (Natalie Wood) as much as he planned to kill her for her 'marriage' to her Indian captor. His journey concerns his attempt, as informed by his

Westerner's unbending personal moral code, to position and contain her within his stringent ideas of conduct and behavior. Much like Charlie, Ethan is unconcerned with how Debbie's needs and wants relate to his own mission (we can safely assume she is not hoping to be murdered); his only goal is to selfishly force her into a position that fits within his neatly defined code. Both Charlie and Ethan, then, are shown to be incapable of allowing those they care about to live outside their codes, as well. By not shying away from the selfish nature of Charlie's actions, Scorsese both critiques Charlie's spiritual impulses as something less than holy (and perhaps derived more from secular, onscreen idols) while positioning him among the morally complex protagonists of later Westerners.

However, because Charlie continues enabling Johnny Boy to the end, he is never "forced to confront the ultimate limits of his moral ideas" (Warshow, 143) the way that Edwards is, and so does not have time to reorient himself and redefine his code. When Johnny finally does succeed in extricating himself from Charlie's code of honor, Charlie immediately re-inserts himself, once again trying to hide Johnny and "figure [things] out." Allowing Johnny to die for his actions, a perfectly warranted and sensible thing to do, also means that Charlie has broken his code as he defined it for himself. That, more than a true concern for Johnny's safety, appears to be the motivating factor behind Charlie's final efforts, as suggested by Charlie's "confession" during the car ride, which once again connects Charlie's code of honor to an adaptation (and corruption) of Catholic teachings. As Warshow notes, in refusing Johnny his own accountability, "what [Charlie] defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image — in fact his honor…. If he had chosen to [not] save his friend, he would have violated the [very] image of himself that he had made essential to his existence" (140, 142).

While it rarely, if ever, happens, Warshow suggests that if the Westerner were to break his code, "the movie would have… to end with his death, for only by his death could the image have been restored" (142). *Mean Streets*, of course, does not end in Charlie's death, but rather

in his expulsion. This exile is much more explicit in the initial draft of *Season of the Witch*. In that early scripted version, Johnny Boy dies in the shootout in Brooklyn. Giovanni dispatches his lieutenant Mario, who presents Charlie with an open plane ticket and tells him that he is free to go anywhere else, but he cannot stay in the neighborhood (Scorsese, et al.). The filmed version is far more open ended, but on the DVD commentary track, and in numerous interviews, Scorsese makes it clear: "they can't go back." Charlie, in particular, has been banished, pushed to the frontier's outskirts, (here realized as Brooklyn) and let known that his presence was no longer necessary or welcome.

That Scorsese is adamant that the film ends in exile and not death confirms that Charlie's journey mirrors that of a Western protagonist's. In accordance with generic prescriptions, the Western hero cannot stay amongst the frontier community due to his adherence to his code, which puts him at odds with the one-size-fits-all regulations of law and order. Often, this conflict is reconciled by the hero 'riding off into the sunset,' removing himself from the community on his own accord. However, as many critics and scholars note, when the Westerner failed to do so himself, the task of removing the hero in later Westerns increasingly fell to the community itself. Cawelti notes that "Westerns increasingly carried the antithesis between success and honor to its inevitable conclusion: the destruction or exile of the hero from the developing town which can no longer permits the explosions of individual will and [actions] necessary to defend the heroic honor" (45), and his statement is an equally apt description of Charlie's situation at the end of the film. His decision in the hallway, where he leaves Teresa, mid-seizure, to chase after Johnny Boy not only serves as the final proof of his "rigid… attitude in dealing with his very dynamic, contested world" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 27) but the catalyst for his eviction. While Scorsese is often quick to point out that Charlie *does* secure someone to watch over her before he leaves, this once again confirms that, even in such a high stakes predicament, Charlie is incapable of abandoning his mediating, middle-man status, thus forcing

the community to take action against him. It is clear that his self prescribed code of honor, which compels him to remove Johnny from any situation where he will have to answer for his own actions, places him at odds with the laws of that community, which say that Johnny must be held accountable.

Of course, the community is justified in doing so; just as the liability is too high for a frontier community to allow a rouge gunfighter "split between old and new concepts of law and morality" (Cawelti 95) to remain in the vicinity but outside the jurisdiction of their laws, allowing Charlie to continue to shuttle Johnny from club to club and borough to borough, making excuses for his behavior not only prolongs the inevitable, but forces a more brutal outcome. Already, both he and the ostensibly innocent Teresa are drawn into the carnage meant only for Johnny Boy "because he could not ultimately reconcile the conflict between the town and his [self asserted] heroism" (Cawelti 45). As Grist observes, the parting montage of the other characters confirms that life in Little Italy goes on regardless of whether Charlie is present or not (93-4), confirms that the neighborhood no longer had a need for Charlie's 'peacekeeping' services.

It is not as if Charlie has not been given any other options. Tony (David Proval) serves as an alternate example of a middle man in the neighborhood, staying neutral and avoiding involvement in any and all conflicts. He advises Charlie to "be like [him]" and is, in fact, the only member of the gang who seems to have direction and some degree of success. By the end, he is the only one unaffected, seen literally washing his hands. Teresa, too, offers a more literal out, imploring him to rent an uptown apartment with her. His answer is always the same, he's needed in the neighborhood, either to help his uncle Giovanni and 'inherit' a restaurant from a bad debt, or to help watch out for Johnny. Of course, the film undercuts such claims; his interest in owning a restaurant, or any kind of business, is tenuous at best, he provides little, if any, assistance in Giovanni's operation, and Johnny clearly does not appreciate his efforts. This

confirms that Charlie actively resists leaving, and will continue to remain in the neighborhood until the community acts to remove him.

Curiously, this externally imposed banishment also serves to position Charlie with the dead Indian Ethan and his posse discover in *The Searchers,* who "has to wander forever between the winds" after Ethan desecrates his corpse.

While I previously argued that, in *Knocking*, the neighborhood took on the traits of a distinctly savage environment, here that same neighborhood setting is best understood to represent the Western frontier town, thanks in large part to Giovanni's presence. Whereas *Knocking*'s setting was characterized by the absence of mature adults, allowing JR and his pals' juvenile savagery to suffuse, in *Mean Streets*, not only are the protagonists older, but in Giovanni, there is an authority figure whose rule is both recognized and respected. In contrast to the younger men, who are spurned to rash decisions by emotion, Giovanni's demeanor is always restrained, each judgment seemingly arrived at only under logical and rational processes. Further, the only representative of the "actual" law is a corrupt cop (D'Mitch Davis) who extorts Joey for even more money, standing in direct contrast to Giovanni's (ostensibly) fair and just edicts. And while we are made to understand that he is most assuredly a gangster, we do not actually see him engaged in any unlawful activities onscreen.

Certainly, understanding the neighborhood as the surrogate frontier town seeks to contextualize Charlie's banishment, but it also helps to inform our interpretations of Johnny Boy's behavior as well. As I mentioned in the introduction, each of the post-*Knocking* gangster films in this study contain a character who both typifies the traditional onscreen gangster and corresponds with the Western savage. That this character is a close friend of the protagonist speaks to both the inherent closeness of the gangster and the Westerner, and of the Westerner and the savage. In *Mean Streets*, this character is best understood as Johnny Boy, though he is not the perfect onscreen gangster figure that the later gangster/savages will be; as only

Scorsese's third feature, we should not expect the film to typify the formula in the same way that work created decades later does. Aspects of the gangster role can be found spread across Johnny, Giovanni and Michael to varying degrees; however, Johnny's importance in the narrative, his relationship to Charlie, and the fact that the *Season of the Witch* script confirms that Johnny was originally intended to "ultimately lie dead in the streets," which Colin MacArthur considers "perhaps the most rigid" (55) gangster signifier all indicate that Johnny should be understood to be the gangster/savage figure.

Indeed, of any character, it is Johnny Boy who best embodies the "tragic hero" trapped in the "dangerous and sad city… [denied] at least the theoretical possibility of another world in [a] happier American culture" (Warshow 131). Like the gangster, he is a "struggling, aggressive male from an inner-city, working class background" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 89) and effuses a hatred of where he is, the neighborhood and its inhabitants. Indeed, the more he reacts against Charlie's attempts to contain him, the more his actions involve innocent parties, like the Puerto Rican apartment into whose window he inadvertently fires his gun, or the man on the sidewalk whom he pummels instead of meeting with Michael. In the DVD commentary, Scorsese explains that Johnny's essential "anarchy" stems from his realization that he "can't physically or intellectually rise above where his is;" thus, like the gangster, he focuses his self-destructive tendencies outward, against others in the "urban society that created and destroyed him" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 88).

However, such aimless aggressions also correspond to the Western savage who, as Cawelti notes, is likewise "associated with lawlessness, a love of violence, and a rejection of the town's settled way of life" (35). Like the gangster, the savage is often depicted "without culture [and] without manners" (Warshow 136) and the film's depiction of "an off-balanced madman with nowhere to go and nowhere to hide" (Keyser 42) both highlights the gangster's "irrational

brutality" (Warshow 132) and quietly confirms "savagery['s]… close relationship to madness" (Cawelti 35).

Certainly, Johnny's "anarchistic savagery with its spontaneity and freedom" (Cawelti 53) also embodies the "more positive" (Cawelti 35) aspects of the savage as well. He seems to "have the capacity to live and move freely in the wilderness" (Cawelti 35), as evidenced by the ease with which he darts over rooftops, and both evades the police and ducks countless debt collectors throughout the neighborhood. Johnny is constantly associated with firecrackers and guns; indeed he the only (main) character to brandish either, suggesting, if not "a mastery of the tools of violence" (Cawelti 35) then at least a possession of and association with these implements. Further, Johnny exhibits a "strong masculinity" (Cawelti 35), evidenced by his split introductions which show him wantonly destroying public property and proudly displaying his two female 'catches,' one hanging from each arm, as he enters the bar. In Joey's pool house, it is only Johnny who shows any interest in the women listening to the jukebox, and when the fight does break out, he is the only one from Charlie's gang who stands his ground and fights back. (Of course, we should be quick to acknowledge his responsibility for the fight starting in the first place.)

Finally, by understanding Johnny in the role of the Western savage, his relationship with Charlie seems to comment on the tradition of the Indian/Westerner doubling that is found in many Westerns, including, unsurprisingly, *The Searchers*. While the Ethan/Scar (Henry Brandon) relationship is obviously more antagonistic than that of Charlie/Johnny, as Leslie Stern points out, "Scar, the man, exists as a projection of all that Ethan desires and fears" (46). In much the same way, Annette Wernblad refers to Johnny as a "disruptive shadow force" (30), claiming that he "represents everything Charlie is trying to repress" (31). Marc Raymond ("Multiplicity"), in his assessment, suggests allusions to a more intimate closeness, but

otherwise affirms Johnny's function as an alter-ego or counterpoint to Charlie throughout the film.

While the friendship between men of opposing 'tribes' is not an inherently Western trait; indeed, Cawelti reminds us of Leslie Fielder's claim "that the male figures most representative of American Literature had their closest personal relationships with a male of another race" (61). Instead, he argues that the largely *unchanging* nature of the friendship between the Westerner and Indian is unique to the genre. Neither must change any previously held idea about or understanding of the other for the friendship to continue, and we certainly see this reflected in Johnny and Charlie's relationship; each seems to have accepted the other unconditionally. Admittedly, Charlie is pressuring Johnny to fundamentally change, but in no way is it inferred than any aspect of their friendship hangs in the balance or that its future is predicated on Johnny's success. In fact, as we have seen, the more Johnny does not change, the more time Charlie insists on spending with him, culminating in the Brooklyn shooting. As I previously stated, my purpose is not to suggest that there exists a singular summation of Johnny and Charlie's extremely complex friendship, however, when viewed through a Western lens, it does parallel the intricate, interdependent ties inherent to the gangster/savage and the Westerner.

Such an interpretation also helps to inform our analysis of Teresa, especially as she relates to the men. Like the Girl before her, Teresa's position comments on and recontextualizes both the 'bad' saloon girl, and the 'good' woman's domestic taming influence the Westerner both fears and needs. Scorsese has faced criticisms throughout his entire career over the unflattering portrayals of women in his films, (though, it certainly begs the question of just who his films *are* flattering to) yet "a strong emphasis on male bonding has always been an important tradition in the Western" (Cawelti 123) as well.

In *Mean Streets*, as in the Western "the relationship between the men is far more important than any encounters between men and women" (Cawelti 123), and this is reflected in

Teresa's first appearance, some 40 minutes into the film. By this time, the relationship between Charlie and Johnny Boy, and the resulting conflicts and stakes are well established. Charlie has already encountered multiple women, all of whom are explicitly 'bar girls' who are used and disposed of almost immediately. The only one whom Charlie specifically introduces to the audience is Diane (Jeannie Bell), a dancer who serves a very ancillary role in the narrative. When Teresa finally appears onscreen, she is half naked, on display in a window across the tenement courtyard. There is no indication that she is not yet another unimportant woman who will likewise disappear from the narrative entirely when Charlie can once again hang out with his male friends.

It is hardly a coincidence that just previous to watching her dress, Charlie and Johnny were perilously close to sharing a bed. Raymond calls that moment the most obvious scene "in 70s cinema… [that] shows the displaced homoeroticism of the male duo," arguing that her appearance at this moment, "and [indeed] Charlie and Theresa's [sic] entire relationship can be read as a displacement for the central male/male relationship" ("Multiplicity"). While it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the film's possible homoerotic subtexts, similar parallels exist with the Western woman. Cawelti, citing Leslie Fielder's work, notes the "strong emotional, cultural, and even sexual ties between hero [Charlie] and savage [Johnny] that are disrupted by the female" (30).

Indeed, Teresa's presence in the Brooklyn shooting is a direct result of this disruption. Throughout the film, she and Johnny have been vying with one another for Charlie's attentions, and in this moment, Johnny is threatening to succeed in doing the very thing Teresa has been attempting to do: take Charlie out of the neighborhood. In a cut reminiscent of many Hawks' Westerns, immediately after demanding to accompany the guys, Teresa is shown seated directly between them, quite literally having inserted herself into the middle of the male friend group. Despite this explicit attempt to "take over the role of [his] masculine comrades and

become the hero's true companion" (Cawelti 43), a common strategy employed by Westerns to resolve the threat that a woman's presence introduces to the hero's masculine group, Charlie once again opts for the middle ground. In his refusal to fully choose between her and Johnny, all are grievously injured in the violence meant only for Johnny.

Teresa's most evident Western trait, of course, is that she spends the film trying to remove Charlie from the neighborhood, away from Johnny and Giovanni: "women are primary symbols of civilization in the western… who symbolically represents the end of the old wilderness life" (Cawelti 30). The Westerner's girlfriend's primary role was often to persuade him into giving up his frontier lifestyle, be it though nagging or threatening to leave him, both tactics which Teresa employs.

Yet, at the same time, Teresa is hardly portrayed as an embodiment of domestic virtue, and indeed even her desire to move away complicates that standing. Certainly, while her desire to get an apartment with Charlie aligns her with "the very entanglements [the Westerner] sought to avoid: society, the 'settled life' confining responsibilities" (Ray 60), such a move actually takes her *away* from family and away from the only community she and Charlie have ever known. Scorsese acknowledges that Giovanni's disapproval stems from the fact that "she threatens the value of the family: to stay together and support each other" (Schickel 104). Additionally, after the couple's tryst in the hotel, Teresa is shown admonishing the maid. Setting aside the implicit racial subtext for a moment, it is clear the film seeks to disassociate Teresa from the domestic chores and responsibilities for which the 'good' Western woman is a harbinger.

Of course, no one, onscreen or off, will mistake Teresa for a chaste, virginal Madonna. Indeed, in "her quasi-masculine independence," (Warshow 138) her (implied) employment, autonomous will and sexual promiscuity she fits more the description of Western prostitute "whose morals deprived her of all rights to entangling domesticity" (Ray 60). However, for all of Charlie's lukewarm support and protestations to the contrary, he clearly *does* see her as

marriage material, and is invested in the longevity of their relationship. As a figure constructed in the Westerner's image, he is "not thus compelled to seek love [but] is prepared to accept it, perhaps," and this is superficially demonstrated in his repeated reluctance to admit his love to Teresa.

Yet, while the Westerner is "constantly [seen] in situations where love is at best an irrelevance" (Warshow 137), Charlie expends a great deal of effort, and risks the essence of who he is, to continue to see Teresa, going behind the backs of his uncle, who expressly forbade such a union, and his friends, whose imagined opinions were responsible for his standing up Diane, the only other woman who appears onscreen more than once.

The most important indication, however, may be in the fact that she is never considered to be 'one of the guys;' she remains distinctly apart (and, in fact, hidden). Whereas Western 'bad' women are shown to "share the hero's understanding of life" (Warshow 138), elevating them to something of an equal footing, Teresa is wholly excluded for Charlie's male existence. Both Giovanni and Charlie treat her as a 'value' to be protected (Warshow 138) and it is only her "other" status that allows her treat Michael with such contempt when he comes to her looking for Johnny Boy. Though he gripes about it, he retrieves her eggplant from the floor while she lords over him from above, an action he most assuredly would not have taken had he considered her anything close to an equal.

Paradoxically, this can also be seen as the motivation for Charlie's leaving during her seizure in the hallway. Though he does procure someone (albeit haphazardly) to stay with her, he leaves her in her moment of need to pursue Johnny, clearly indicating that she comes second to his world of male camaraderie, she does not belong to it, reflecting "the classic rationale of the Western hero: women don't belong in this country" (Ray 80). More than anything else, it is as a direct result of Charlie's decision in the hallway that he is exiled, proving that his

> association with the boys remain[s] one of the most important aspects of the hero's life and style. Not only do the hero's ties of friendship motivate much of his behavior, but … the great sense of honor and adherence to a highly disciplined code of behavior… springs from his association with the masculine group. The 'Code of the West' is in every respect a male ethic and its values and prescriptions relate primarily to relationships between men. (Cawelti 43)

Interestingly, if Teresa is understood to possess qualities of both, but ultimately resemble more the Western 'good' girl, it is Diane who embodies the 'bad' Western woman. She is, literally, the "dark girl," a barroom girl, an exotic dancer, the "feminine embodiment of the hero's savage, spontaneous side" (Cawelti 31). She and Charlie do share an understanding of one another, with Diane acting as something of a confidante. Charlie is seemingly only able to reveal his plans and ideas for the restaurant to her. Though it is realistically never anything but a pipe dream, like the proverbial gunfighter's small farm that knows he will never own, it is ostensibly his way out, on his terms, and it is Diane, not Teresa, with whom he seems to want to share that dream.

Of course, as in the Western, "the dark woman must be… abandoned" (Cawelti 31) and *Mean Streets* makes a concerted effort to revisit Diane in the closing sequence, despite her having now been absent from the narrative for nearly half the film. In fact, it is directly after his tryst with Teresa in the hotel room that Charlie forsakes his meeting with Diane, suggesting that Charlie has supplanted the 'bad' woman with the 'good,' "forsaking a way of life" (Warshow 138) in the process.

Finally, like *Knocking*, *Mean Streets* too appears to have taken the Western ritual of the community dance and distorted it, taking what was intended to display a "community worth saving" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 137), and corrupting into something more frustrated and

desperate. In *Mean Streets*, the scene in which Charlie and the gang host a welcome back party for returning neighborhood veteran, Jerry (Harry Northup), seems to be imbued with the same mixture of (and progression through) excitement, aggression, anger and frustration as *Knocking*'s "El Watusi" scene. Again a depiction of nearly all-male drunken debauchery that quickly turns violent, here the scene has a narrative purpose beyond a drunken night with the boys: this is the first night Johnny expressly disobeys Charlie and skips a meeting with Michael, escalating the narrative stakes significantly.

As with the previous film's community dance, the violent explosions necessarily turn inwards, indicating a community on the brink of destruction, a destruction that is quite possibly warranted. With the inclusion of the obviously traumatized Vietnam vet, and Charlie's naively misguided gift, the scene adds a level of wider alienation, suggesting the moral corruption and decay shown is not unique to this small community in Little Italy, but has permeated into the wider American society.

Interestingly, in considering *Mean Streets*' cross-generic organization and rituals, Marc Raymond ("Multiplicity") argues that both the above mentioned scene and the pool hall brawl in Joey's bar can be understood to function as musical numbers within a Hollywood musical. While the party scene may be suggested to correspond to multiple generic rituals, the pool hall fight scene cannot realistically be considered a corrupted community dance, as it is not concerned with the disintegration of a single community, but rather opposing communities battling one another.

In these ways, *Mean Streets* sets the foundation, establishing a pattern, which sees the protagonist framed as a man in the middle, navigating between civilization and savagery, doubled by a figure typifying the silver screen gangster and the Western savage, all from the gangster's milieu. Though here it may appear imperfect at times, further analyses will show how each subsequent film in the study works to refine this Western expression, both through a more

seamless fusion of the gangster's and the Westerner's essential traits and settings, and by locating each narrative at a specific 'end of an era' moment in American history.

It would be nearly two decades after *Mean Streets* before Scorsese would revisit the gangster genre with *GoodFellas.* In the interim, he would make eight narrative features and several shorts and documentary projects, including *Taxi Driver;* none of which he considers to be gangster pictures (Schickel 54). However, the amount of scholarship invested in analyzing and comparing Travis Bickle's self-appointed mission to that of Ethan Edwards', as well as the film's near ubiquitous appearance in considerations of a cycle of late 70s "urban Westerns," suggests there may be some validity in discussing the film here. However, as I hope to illustrate in the next chapter, unlike the rest of the included films, *Taxi Driver* actively thwarts its protagonist's efforts to characterize himself and his actions as a Western hero. Thus, for our purposes, the film is much less the Eastern *Searchers* as it is Robin Wood's "incoherent text."

## Taxi Driver

*Taxi Driver* is, in the words of film critic Amy Taubin, "an iconic, emblematic film… that does not leave the American conscience" (Lucca). It is a film that has left its mark on American cinema, and on the culture itself, the perennial subject of myriad writings and discussions, and is likely Scorsese's most discussed work (Grist 123). It is an obligatory mention when reviewing either Scorsese's or De Niro's careers, though it was only their second collaboration together. Its "you talking to me?" line has earned a place in popular culture (although Leighton Grist astutely points out the exchange was likely derived from a scene in *Shane* [1953] [40]) and the film itself has the distinction of inspiring a presidential assassination attempt some five years after its release, though for reasons that do not logically connect to the film's plot.

It is not, however, usually the first title that comes to mind when discussing Westerns, though when Scorsese and Western are mentioned in the same sentence, it may be the film most likely to pop into more cinephilic minds, due to the work of scholars like Leslie Stern and Robert Kolker, among many others, who draw parallels between Travis' (Robert De Niro) quest to save Iris (Jodie Foster) from Sport's (Harvey Keitel) "captivity" and Ethan Edwards' (John Wayne) mission to free Debbie (Natalie Wood) from Scar's (Henry Brandon) tribe in *The Searchers* (1956).

Though such interpretations, and numerous others for whom *Taxi Driver* marks an important entry into the urban or right-wing Western cycle, are not altogether irrational. Indeed, while the Western's place as "the most flexible of narrative formulas" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 45) serves as the foundation for my own study, their arguments and justifications nonetheless place it outside of, and in fact, in opposition to, my own thesis here. After all, while it does contribute to heavily to Scorsese's reputation for making violent film, *Taxi Driver* is rarely, if ever, considered to be a gangster film. Certainly, in his discussion of the film's Noir lineage,

Robert Kolker's comments that the film "presents its character trapped by his environment, swallowed and imprisoned… [and that] the film's central character lives completely enclosed in a city of dreadful night" (217) recalling Warshow's exploration of the "dangerous and sad city of the imagination" that produces the gangster, and that the gangster, in turn both inhabits and personifies (131), which suggests the gangster film is indeed a part of *Taxi Driver*'s more distant genealogy. Nevertheless, Travis is categorically a lone wolf, whose hatred for the criminal "scum" extends to both organized and independent criminals, and one of those killed in the final massacre is referred to as a "mafioso" in both the newspaper's account and the film's credits.

Admittedly this chapter takes something of a different form from the rest; arguing instead why this film, a film not generally thought to be a Western, is, in fact, *not* a Western may seem out of place. Why not, then, also support why Scorsese's other non-gangster, non-Western films should likewise not be considered Westerns? Yet, it is worth discussing *Taxi Drive*r in this study, as it is the film most likely to be acknowledged as having a clear Western influence. As I intend to demonstrate, however, the way the film presents Travis, and the way it structures his journey, fundamentally differs from the other film in this study. Whereas JR, Charlie, Henry, Ace and Amsterdam are consistently positioned as Westerners throughout their respective films, (JR, Charlie and Henry perhaps self-consciously so) Travis lacks both the stringent code of honor as well as the consistent, unchanging motivation and drive to really be considered a Westerner.

Robin Wood used *Taxi Driver* as his initial example in his essay explaining his conception of an "incoherent text," and while I do not fully agree with all aspects of his assessment, it is overall a very helpful way of explaining the film. Far from the negative connotations that usually arise from accusations of incoherency, Wood defines his concept as "works in which the drive towards an ordering experience is visibly defeated…[despite] discernible intelligence (or intelligences) at work in them and [the] high degree of involvement on the part of their makers…. Ultimately, they are works that do not know what they wish to say"

(42). Although screenwriter Paul Schrader admits to being directly influenced by *The Searchers,* a film Wood refers to as "an archetypical incoherent text" (47), while writing the script, I hope my analysis will show the differences between drawing inspiration from a Western and embodying the Western generic rituals.

To be clear, I do not mean to dispute the very valid readings that suggest that "*Taxi Driver* remakes *The Searchers* in part through 'resurrecting' the character of Ethan Edwards in Travis Bickle" (Stern 33):

> The parallels… have been widely documented. For instance, both [protagonists] are veterans of lost wars, both first appear in part of the uniforms of the losing side and both are wanderers. More substantively, Travis' desire to save Iris reflects Ethan's desire to save Debbie; Ethan is an inveterate racist, with an 'irrational' hated of Native Americans; and Ethan's violence can, like that of Travis, be related to frustrated sexual desire: like Scar with Ethan, Sport acts out Travis' id impulses. Sport's implicit sexual relationship with Iris expresses what Travis can only repress. (Grist 144-5)

Lesley Stern's extremely thorough essay offers perhaps the most in-depth assessment of the parallels in both protagonists' "impulse to rescue — to 'return home' — a woman who does not want to be saved" (33). She argues that central to both films is an "obsessive repetition [of violence] in narrative[s] that [are] profoundly disturbed in [their] frequent veering into aimlessly compulsive trajectories" (42). Like Ethan, who is "more obsessed with butchering Scar than with rescuing Debbie," Travis seems to forget Iris is present during the final massacre, suggesting both men are more concerned with "annihilating the dragon/rival rather than saving the princess" (Wernblad 88).

Indeed, "*Taxi Driver* is acutely aware of its own formal identity" (Kolker 221). Paul Schrader readily admits to *The Searchers'* influence on his script, and purposefully wrote the scene in which Iris and Sport share a moment alone as a way of rectifying what he claimed was

a "missing (and arguably essential) scene in *The Searchers* that would define the captured Debbie's relationship to her captor, Chief Scar, and to Comanche life …[though] a scene Ford could not conceivably have filmed" (Wood 46).

However, there is another scene in the film that does this as well; the only other scene in the picture not mediated through Travis' perspective[2], in which Travis watches Betsy (Cybil Shepard) and Tom (Albert Brooks) chat in the campaign office. This scene serves an almost identical purpose, in showing the women's current situations to not be terribly undesirable, and certainly not anything either needs to be rescued from. Betsy has a seemingly unending reserve of flattering attention, albeit not from a very valuable source, but Tom's attentions will tide her over until a more 'appealing' man comes along. Iris' predicament is considerably more complicated, though the "equivocal tenderness" she shares with Sport "call[s] into question the easy assumptions we might have that anything would be preferable (for a thirteen year old girl) to prostitution." Sport offers a gentleness that is arguably genuine, disturbing though it may be, "whereas there is no indication that [the] 'home' [where Travis' actions restore her] offers her anything at all" (Wood 47). Yet the fact that the Betsy version of the "Scar scene" is rarely, if ever, recognized as such suggests that perhaps an overeagerness to find similarities between the films inadvertently creates a critical blind spot to its divergent and sometimes contradictory aims.

In much the same vein, just as I wish to expand upon, rather than discredit, claims to such *Searchers* parallels, it is not my intention here to suggest that critics are mistaken or wrong to evoke *Taxi Driver* in the numerous discussions of the urban Westerns, a cycle of films that Robert B. Ray argues arose in the late 1960s as an ideological answer to the self conscious,

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[2] While both scenes do cut back to reveal Travis sitting in his cab watching, it is clear he is not privy to the content of the conversations. Further, the viewer is never given any indication as to how Travis *imagines* these conversations to play out.

self-reflexive, revisionist 'Left' Westerns of the American New Wave. Whereas revisionist Westerns' reflection of the senseless, pointless violence and ethnic and gendered subjugation of the historical frontier "perfectly represented the counterculture's contradictoriness… [and] persistently evoked the frontier's closing" (Ray 306), urban Westerns "provided old style Western stories in contemporary urban settings" (Ray 312) and especially emphasized the excessive, though righteous and necessary, violence of the solitary actor, against those who sought to destroy the frontier community.

Though known by many names — urban Westerns, street Westerns, post-Westerns, Right Westerns — these films "transplant the lone Western hero into a corrupt, dangerous and usually big city setting" (Grist 125), and watch as this singular man, either a vigilante or a cop or other authority figure, "engage[s] in war with criminals" (Ray 299). As many note, the villains in these films are usually "long haired, wear vaguely hippy clothing and act in a flakey manner that implies drug use" (Grist 125), not-so-subtly associating them with the youth counter-culture, and with the "racism that is a constant of the cycle" (Grist 125), allowing the extent and brutality of the bloodletting against these figures to take the form of ideological revenge. Despite his changed social and cultural settings, Ray argues that the Right Western "did not demand changed institutions, attitudes or lifestyles" (306), nor encourage a more modern or updated approach to the way this pseudo-Westerner chose to handle the situation; "Western individualism and cowboy skills [still prove] more effective against criminals than [whatever modern law enforcement's] organization and technology" (Cawelti 120) can provide.

This "fixation on guns, violence and vigilantism, all in the name of law and order" (Keyser 69) often results in extra-legal explosions of violence, "man-to-man showdowns" that "played like modern gunfights…vindicat[ing] its hero's Western-style tactics and reaffirm[ing] that legal niceties merely obstructed the practice of law and order" (Ray 307). This, many argue, presents disturbing celebration of savage retribution, inadvertently making "the new Western hero of the

Right movies a borderline psychotic, obviously strained by his attempt to keep up the old ways" (Ray 310).

Certainly, *Taxi Driver* fits this description well, as Ray succinctly concludes, "*Taxi Driver*'s basic story followed the Right cycle's loyalty to the classic Western formula: a reluctant individual, confronted by evil, acts on his own to rid society of spoilers" (351). Indeed, Travis, presented as a Midwestern outsider who appears in New York, reflects the drifting Western protagonist, who, "like Shane, merely appeared on the scene, where he lived alone and kept to himself" (Ray 351-2). Implicitly because of his service in Vietnam, he has "shed his close ties with society [echoing] the more mysterious and alienated figure of the heroic gunfighter" (Cawelti 82). Upon finding a society riddled with "scum" and "filth," "the worst kinds of people," and discovering that the machinations of law and order are supremely ineffective at ridding the community of those Travis views as threats to the basic good of society, his initial reluctance gives way to a "legitimated indulgence in violence" (Cawelti 11) that reasserts the social order. His efforts are well received, by both Iris' appreciative family and the wider general public, whose news media celebrate him as a modern hero/savior.

Because the films of the Right cycle posit that the protagonist's actions are wholly justified, given the utter weakness of the authority figures that define the (now urban) community as a whole, this compels the hero to "engage in still larger orgies of violence as avengers of the innocent and destroyers of evil… carried out with a kind of transcendent religious passion" (Cawelti 85). This serves as a particularly apt description of *Taxi Driver*, given how often critics read Scorsese's Catholicism and Schrader's Dutch Calvinist upbringing into the film.

Because a summation of the urban Western is likewise a succinct, thoughtful and accurate analysis of *Taxi Driver,* because the film embodies so many of the street Western's themes and tropes, and does so so efficiently and thoroughly, Ray sees it as the ultimate Right Western: "the film that completed the Right cycle" (328). But while Scorsese and Schrader do

not downplay Travis', or the film's, fixation and fetishization of violence, they each argue that, rather than an apparent endorsement of what is depicted, they purposefully intended the film to be a critique and denouncement of such behavior, "tak[ing] "the idea of macho…to its logical, insane conclusion; graphically, pornographically, insane." Such grotesque exaggeration, which Scorsese understands to be "the central theme of his film," may very well encourage feminist readings, the director argues, such is the staunch critical stance of the picture (Keyser 73).

Grist would agree, noting that rather than celebrating the act, scenes like the Bodega shooting, "render critically apprehensible the racism that the urban Western implicitly validates" (142-3). The film is successful in creating, as Schrader asserts, "a comprehensible (though irrational) psychological reality" (141) by luring the viewer into both sharing Travis' "fragmented subjectivity" (151) and connecting with his "upright seriousness lacking in the film's other characters" (137). However, Schrader insists that "the prolonged slaughter… is a gory extension of violence, more surreal than real… [designed to be so] vastly different from the rest of the film [that it is] a reality unto itself… the psychopath's Second Coming" (Keyser 80). This overexaggerated, clearly unhinged fantasy of violence "salutarily 'corrects' our identification with Travis" (Grist 152), replacing sympathy with abhorrent shock and a critical condemnation of the entirety of Travis' actions which led to this massacre; actions which the audience understood, and were encouraged to justify and champion, due to our sharing Travis' psychopathically skewed perspective. Far from endorsing the ideology of the Right, "its evocation of the urban Western… challenges our ideological investment in violent, vengeful male heroes…. Travis has, in effect, become that which he first railed against" (Grist 151-2).

In fact, this may be the best way of understanding the mohawk Travis comes to wear, which has long been one of the more recognizable images from the film, but which continues to elude a consistent interpretation from critics. While some see it as a reference to Vietnam-era Special Forces troops who would wear it to broadcast the fact that "they were ready to kill. They

were in a psychological and emotional mode to go" (Grist 213), its Indian connotations cannot be overlooked, especially in a Western (urban- or otherwise) context. Certainly, donning an Indian hairstyle can be seen as Travis embracing the savage side of himself, but it also seeks to align him with Sport, whose long hair, headband and turquoise jewelry as much emblems of the counter-culture as they seem to evoke his lawless savagery. Though the Westerner often taps in to his savagery in order to defend the frontier community, he never 'crosses the line' and gives himself over to that savagery to the degree that Travis does, confirming that he has indeed "become that which he [and, by extension, the viewer] first railed against" (Grist 151).

So, if we understand the central thesis of *Taxi Driver* to lie in the ways in which "the film encourages and then critiques our identification with Travis" (Grist 155), if we begin to examine the discrepancies between how Travis presents himself and the way in which the wider diegetic world of the film positions him, we will notice that many central tenets of Western generic conventions and rituals are either absent or deliberately inverted/contradicted. Just as many critics see the violence as celebratory and miss the critique, it is logical that, because the just-below-surface level *Searchers* similarities and Western allusions are so easily apparent, the Western subversions that suggest its 'incoherent text' status are overlooked.

Starting at the end, we will note that there is no ride into the sunset for Travis; he remains in New York (though, arguably, the area around the St. Regis represents a step up from where he had previously been cruising for fares). This, of course, is one of the more rigid tenets of the Western, and one in which the generic formula is based. The massacre scene makes clear that Travis both possesses and is capable of acting upon the savagery that motivates the Westerner's removing himself from the community in which he has 'saved.' Travis' antecedent, Ethan Edwards, did not even try to enter the home with the rest; he understood his fundamental incompatibly with those inside. Travis, however, does not, and is shown hanging around the same group of drivers, having "apparently achieved a degree of social and personal

integration" (Grist 153), suggesting his previous alienation has been alleviated. Indeed, he appears more fully integrated into the community in this scene than at any other time within the film, which is antithetical to the result of the Westerner's mission.

This acceptance also undercuts the expected conclusion of the later Westerns, where the community removes the Westerner who refuses to vacate on his own accord. As we have seen from the newspaper clippings, Travis is regarded as a hero by the community, and is subject to no consequences for his violent (and certainly unlawful) actions, making it extremely unlikely that law enforcement or political forces will evict him. Further, his conversation with Betsy makes clear Palentine (Leonard Harris) has secured the nomination. Recalling that Palentine was almost the subject of Travis' violence himself, and is only able to accept the nomination because he was 'spared,' this suggests an implicit endorsement on Travis' behalf, placing him in something of a ruling or authoritarian position. (Of course, this is empirically absurd; Travis did not actively choose to spare Palentine as much as his assassination attempt was thwarted when he was run off by the Secret Service. However, given Travis' "irrational psychological reality" [Grist 141], this is not likely to correspond with his rationalization of the events.)

Certainly, the justification behind the Westerner's removal, be it by his hand or not, is that his savagery represents an ongoing and ultimately uncontainable threat to the community. In fact, as many critics note, in those rare cases in which a Westerner is allowed to stay in the community, it only because he has partnered with a woman; her domesticating influence being sufficient enough to instill a "civilizing and moralizing restraint" (Cawelti 123) necessary to undermine his impulses towards savagery. Travis rejects this option as well, deflecting Betsy's many come-ons in the cab, making clear that he intends to remain in the community on his own terms. Scorsese fully intended such, often acknowledging that Travis' abrupt adjustment of the

rear view mirror, and accompanying discordant, jarring screech of the score confirms "he'll do it again."

By insisting that "the protagonist's threat remains" (Grist 154), Scorsese and Schrader very intentionally subvert a basic Western foundation. Schrader, for his part, maintains that "the ending is not meant to be realistic… at that point, we're living out a psychopath's fantasy" (Corliss 46), and there are several indications that the final coda scene is Travis' imagined fallout from his massacre, self-serving and congratulatory. Many critics point out the "reflexive allusiveness" (Grist 154) that ends the film in "a kind of paralysis" (Wood 48). As Roger Ebert observes, "the end sequence plays like music, not drama: it completes the story on an emotional, not a literal, level" (275).

Betsy's appearance and behavior, in particular, lends itself to a fantasy reading. We do not see her enter the cab, and she remains a disembodied head, viewed only though the rearview mirror, for the duration of the ride. While both she and Travis "appear to still be acting out familiar roles… of [the] stoic hero… and [the] admiring, inviting female" (Grist 153), there is something decidedly 'off' about her delivery. Betsy has previously been constructed as "a figure of total vacuity whose only definable character trait is opportunism" (Wood 46), and thus, it would certainly be within her character to find herself attracted to Travis as a result of his recent publicity. Yet here, her emotionless, distanced, almost robotic manner of speech while flirting does not reflect her previous interactions with either Tom or Travis. Rather, her flat, impersonal inquiries sound as though they have been manufactured by a mind with little experience with or understanding of women, suggesting the entire interaction is a product of Travis' thoughts.

Viewing the coda as a fantasy derived from the urban/Right Western's unchecked celebration of violence and vigilantism "thus implie[s] that the behind the Right cycle's fantasies [lies] madness" (Ray 358), which echoes Scorsese's sentiment about taking machoism to its logical, extreme conclusion, though Ray suggests that the film "so carefully reproduced the

appearance of a standard Right film that even sophisticated observers" (358), himself included, sometimes fail to register the critique.

Further, critic Amy Taubin argues that De Niro's casting is especially problematic to viewing Travis as a man who originates outside the community, as she expounded upon in a *Film Comment* podcast with Violet Lucca. "De Niro, is so many ways, is the opposite of… Paul Schrader's Travis Bickle, [who] comes out of the Midwest [and] is this tortured, incredibly repressed [character from] the most extreme, fundamental Christianity at that point." Despite De Niro's characteristically meticulous preparation for the role, which included significant study of Midwestern veterans' accents, "there is no way for Robert De Niro to disguise the fact that his is Italian-American, Catholic [and a native New Yorker]….There is [some facet of] his unconscious that governs [both his decisions, and others' interpretations and reactions to him,] even when he [has] made [himself into] a character."

While it is far outside of the purpose of this study to debate the validity or motivations of the film's casting decisions, Taubin's recognition of the incongruity between De Niro's onscreen Travis and Schrader's Travis as written on the page acknowledges that "there is so much in the subtext that's never spoken about but [that] people perceive when they see the films, [even if] it doesn't quite [consciously] rise to the surface" (Lucca). Rather than being "a real flaw" in the film, however, this fundamental discrepancy can be read to further erode interpretations of *Taxi Driver* as an urban Western. If Travis is less the archetypal, unassimilable loner who drifted into the community from beyond its borders, and more a native city dweller overrun with a generalized, misdirected rage and alienation, it shifts the critical focus from a modern, urban updating of *The Searchers* to include a wider range of cinematic influences, including the gangster picture. Though it is likewise beyond the scope of my investigation to explore *all* of the generic antecedents of *Taxi Driver*, it seems that Travis is at least as much of a descendent of *Scarface*'s (1932) Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) as he is of Ethan Edwards.

Moreover, unlike JR, Charlie, and, to some degree, Henry Hill, Travis does not see nor consciously fashion himself as a Western protagonist. Though he does don the cowboy boots, pearl snap Western shirts and Wranglers favored by Schrader himself, Travis does not claim to watch or even be aware of, much less influenced by, the Western films that so possessed Charlie and JR. When Betsy cuts their ill-fated date short, he apologizes by explaining/insisting "I don't know much about movies," which appears to be the one aspect of his personality that the empirical observations of the film confirm; when we do see Travis going to the movies, it is exclusively porno theatres that he attends. It is also reasonable to assume that he was earnestly not familiar with Kris Kristofferson's music, despite his critical and commercial success, given the wide array of other characters (Sport, Iris, Betsy, fellow cab drivers) who all accurately peg him as "square." Certainly, he is not immune from *mass* culture; many critics note his 'junk-food lifestyle,' especially in the first half of the film, where he seems to subsist solely on McDonalds, Coca Cola and Budweiser, and the porn consumption would certainly fit in. However, his near-complete alienation does appear to extend to creative forms of the American *popular* culture, from which he does seem to exist wholly apart. Therefore, even allowing that the film was constructed, in part, with overt Western influences, Travis himself does not rationalize his actions or consciously model his journey based on Western heroes, as other protagonists in this study do. Travis' Westernness, inasmuch as it exists, and in whatever form it takes, is applied by viewers after the fact and not a deliberate example of "the ways the film version of reality warps the consciousness of those without sufficient detachment" (Braudy).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Travis is emphatically not the "psychologically static man of personal integrity" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57) that a Westerner is required to be. In fact, Travis' personality is perhaps the best example of a Westerner's antithesis, given his complete lack of a personal code of honor and how often his motivations reposition themselves.

This “failure to establish a consistent, and adequately rigorous, attitude for the protagonist” is what Wood considers to be “the central incoherence of *Taxi Driver*” (47).

Certainly, *Taxi Driver* is one of the few films whose goal-oriented protagonist’s goals constantly shift. Initially he sets out to “free” Betsy from what he perceives to be a restricting, confining, dead end job with boorish co-workers, towards the seemingly trivial end of electing another smiling but ineffectual politician, and it does not take much resistance on Betsy’s part for Travis to wholly and fully abandon that mission, instead turing his attentions towards the rather nebulously defined “scum of the streets,” certainly informed by racism but without directing his vengeful rage solely at African Americans. Despite first encountering Iris, stoned and seemingly in danger, within the first 30 minutes, he does not have a conversation with her until the second half of the film, and it is only after his half-baked and poorly planned attempt to assassinate Palentine spectacularly fails that he seems to come up with the idea of violently liberating her. Given the seemingly haphazard, incidental ways in which he decided on a victim, there is every reason to believe that, had he likewise failed to kill Sport, another target would have been procured according to equally arbitrary qualifications.

Therefore, unlike Ethan Edwards, who pursues Debbie relentlessly (only his reasons for the pursuit shift) or other Western heroes who spend their films undertaking their quest with single-minded determination, Travis flails indiscriminately in all directions. It is never fully clear whether, as Grist suggests, the Palentine attempt is a conscious effort to ‘free’ Betsy from her surrogate father figure (147), or merely a lackadaisical attack on an inadequate authority figure, *a la* the urban Western. Either way, the amount of narrative investment in developing it, and the multiple other distractions from the ‘saving Iris’ storyline clearly indicates that Travis is no more seriously invested in Iris’ personal wellbeing than he is in anything else in his life. “Travis’ heroism resulted [entirely] from chance” (Ray 358), rather than a consistent and concerted effort prompted by his unbending adherence to a personal code.

If anything, the only constant to Travis' actions is that they seem to be initiated out of self interest, designed only to reinforce his own self image by forcefully manipulating others into the "vague abstractions" (Keyser 76) he has created about them in his own head, abstractions that are often the complete opposite of the other characters' realities. Certainly, none of those he fantasizes about harming have done him any wrong. He has no personal, or even professional investment in his actions beyond a need for recognition; he is "the proverbial Boy Scout who helps the little old lady across the street, whether or not she wants to go" (Ebert 273). This desire for recognition not only separates him from the Westerner, whose code not only serves as motivation enough, but requires he downplay celebrations and attention, but, as Scorsese notes, is directly responsible for his outburst: Travis is "a guy who desperately needs to be recognized for something but has nothing he can do to gain himself the recognition. He has something to say but not sure what, so finally out of frustration he turns to violence as a means of expressing himself" (Keyser 71).

Unlike the Westerner, who "fights… to state what he is, and [to] live in a world which permits that statement" (Warshow 141), it is clear Travis does not have the faintest clue of just who he is, and his efforts to articulate that, to the outside world or to himself, are often contradictory. Throughout the film, Travis' voiceover narration, ostensibly his journaled thoughts, reveal him to be an extremely unreliable narrator. Far from representing Travis as someone "capable of remarkable insight into his cursed life" (Keyser 69), the voiceover is purposefully deceitful, describing the exact opposite from what the screen shows.

Two of the more overt examples of this occur around the Palentine attempt. In the entry before he goes to the rally, Travis writes that his "whole life has pointed in one direction" and that he has "no choice." Yet as we have previously noted, this decision seems to have materialized out of thin air. Nowhere else has the narrative suggested Travis' problems can be traced back to Palentine or that the act of wiping him out will solve anything or punish anyone.

By this time, Travis and Iris have already shared two important one-on-one scenes, and the scene directly preceding this voiceover concerns Sport and Iris, suggesting Travis has fully shifted his attentions away from Betsy and Palentine. Grist's reading notwithstanding, the two pairings seem to exist wholly separate from one another in the film, and, by extension, Travis' psyche. Even through his warped perspective, if Travis understands his life to be pointed anywhere at this point, it is likely towards freeing Iris (once again, something he advocates for her, not something she herself desires).

Immediately after Travis is thwarted at the rally, he returns home, chasing down a handful of pills with a can of Budweiser, despite an earlier declaration in the journals that "there will be no more pills… no more destroyers of my body." Travis' familiarity with the action suggests that the "abuse [that] has gone on too long" had never actually been ceased. Likewise, he writes in his journals that he will bring "true force [that] all the kings men cannot put… back together again" as he trains, yet his actual displays of force consist of being run off by those who've undergone authentic training, and a messy, inefficient shootout he wins only through sheer firepower; all of those shot in the massacre survive their first encounter and manage to attack him again. He further blames the dead flowers Betsy rejected for his headaches and self-diagnosed stomach cancer, though 10 minutes later, we witness his breakfast of sugar, white bread and peach schnapps. (And surely, he alone is responsible for not throwing the rotten bouquets out.)

The anniversary/birthday card to his parents (while also calling into question whether or not they are the intended recipients; does he have living parents?) is also narrated to us and likewise contains multiple blatant fallacies: reporting that he is "going with a girl" though none has been seen since Betsy's departure 30 minutes previous, his claim to working long hours for the government (this narration plays over his first interest in/attendance at a Palentine rally) and a promise to see them soon. While lofty white lies to assuage parental expectations are

certainly not unprecedented, the fact that we are privy to them at all, coupled with the flat, monotone delivery consistent with the journal entries, suggests a similarity between the falsehoods of the card and those in the journals. Since the majority of the voice overs are contextualized as journal entries, it's unclear whether he is lying to himself or if this is an accurate representation of how he understands and views the world. It is also possible, given that Travis' journal entries are directly inspired by those of Arthur Brenner, that he intends the journals to explain and justify his actions to an outside observer (and by extension, the viewer) after he is dead.

The sheer volume and depth of these subversions, inversions and "unresolved contradictions" (Wood 46) that pepper the film only serve to further justify Wood's use of *Taxi Driver* to examine his notion of the "incoherent text." By examining the differences between the "vision of Travis Bickle… [and] the vision of the film" which Wood notes are not" identical… nor clearly distinguishable" from one another, we begin to observe that for as many instances in which Travis seems to uphold the Westerner's image, or endorse the urban/Right Western's ideological revisions, there are, in equal measure, instances in which the film encourages the viewer to step outside "the mindset of the character" (Schickel 114) and criticize that which he wants us to champion.

Although some critical work and many repeat viewings may be necessary to parse them out, I hope I have illustrated several ways in which the film's vision, in fact, *is* "clearly distinguishable" from "Travis' reflected subjectivity… his perceptual *and* ideological space [that] we… are made to share… once we 'enter' Travis' cab" (Grist 131, 133). The incoherence then lies in the idea that the film can concurrently support completely contradictory, yet equally valid readings. Far from demeaning the film for that, I, like Robin Wood, only mean to illustrate the ways in which *Taxi Driver* "offer[s a] more complex experience than [has] been generally recognized" (61). However, while I do not mean to suggest that analyses of Travis as a modern

day Ethan Edwards are not credible or insightful, the overall lack of a consistent narrative trajectory or motivation behind the protagonist's actions, coupled with the critical stance the picture encourages, places *Taxi Driver* beyond a simple Western recontextualization, instead demanding a more nuanced and complex interpretation.

## GoodFellas

By the time *GoodFellas* hit theatres in the fall of 1990, it had been nearly two decades since Scorsese last made a film in his career-defining genre. While half of the intervening eight feature narratives were set in New York, and just as many starred Robert De Niro, none were gangster films. “I never thought I would make another gangster film until *GoodFellas* came up,” (Schickel 55) Scorsese admits. And *GoodFellas* most emphatically is a gangster film. A critical and popular success that led Roger Ebert to declare, “no finer film has ever been made about organized crime” (124), it is a perennial favorite for both fans of the genre and the gangsters themselves. Scorsese relays an anecdote to Richard Schickel about when the second in command of the Sicilian Mafia was apprehended, “an Italian reporter asked him if any movie about that world was accurate. And he said, ‘well, *GoodFellas*’” (190). Like *Taxi Driver*, its dialog has entered the popular vernacular and is often cited as Scorsese’s best film, giving the long since canonized *Raging Bull* (1980) a run for its money.

Certainly, in those 17 years separating *Mean Streets* and *GoodFellas*, Scorsese became a more adept filmmaker in many respects. For our purposes, the three later films in this study display a move towards a more seamless and inextricable fusion of the gangster film and the Western, to where “the two genres [more clearly] coexist as part of the same surface” (Reed & Thompson), and *GoodFellas* lays the framework for this blending.

Unlike JR and Charlie who are both portrayed as men surrounded by, yet distinctly apart from, gangsters and gangster culture, Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) is proudly and archetypically a gangster. He is an ethnic outsider from an urban, working-class neighborhood, denied “at least the theoretical possibility of another word” (Warshow 131) where he might achieve success under more conventional, mainstream, certainly, legal channels; indeed Henry’s father initially champions his young son’s work ethic. Henry claims Paulie (Paul Sorvino) and his gang are

simply “the police department for… people that can’t go to the cops…. That’s it, that’s what it’s all about” as though, had they not been “denied a legitimate route to power and success” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85), men in Henry’s world would have been the ones to uphold and enforce the laws.

Henry goes to great lengths to present himself as the “exciting, self-sufficient individual… [a] self-made American male” (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 108, 141) “required to make his own way, to make his life” using the only channels available to a man in his position, “without background or advantages” (Warshow 131). Karen Hill (Lorraine Bracco) claims as much herself, rationalizing that “it was more like Henry was enterprising… he and the guys were making a few bucks hustling, while all the other guys were sitting on their asses, waiting for handouts. Our husbands… were blue-collar guys. The only way they could make extra money… was to go out and cut a few corners.”

Of course, the film clearly demonstrates that through cutting those corners Henry and the other gangsters’ careers are, in actuality, the “nightmare inversion of the [American] values of ambition and opportunity” (Warshow 137). Far from an innocuous blue-collar husband taking a side job to make ends meet for the family, Henry “represents the perverse alter ego of the ambitious, profit minded American male” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85). He, and the others with whom he works, do not achieve their success through ‘earning,’ but through force and coercion. (Though modern American culture might suggest that there is no difference; certainly that is the thesis of Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* [2013].) Indeed, rather than the blood, sweat and tears one associates with a hard-working moonlighter, the amount of time Henry and his crew spend drinking, gambling, entertaining mistresses and generally hanging around typifies the gangster’s lifestyle, where “leisure is likely to be spent in debauchery so compulsively aggressive as to only seem another aspect of his work” (Warshow 136). This melding of business and pleasure is unquestionably a central tenet of *GoodFellas*, as

one is hard pressed to recall a deal which was not hatched, discussed, planned or celebrated in a bar, restaurant, poker game, or other site of leisure. (Certainly, many Westerns also feature a character unable to live in the "savage environment" without the crutch of alcohol [Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 69].)

Yet, like JR and Charlie, Henry goes to a great deal of effort to consciously and deliberately position himself as a mediating force. As we began to see emerge with *Taxi Driver*, though there with inconclusive results, Henry consistently, knowingly and willfully constructs the audience's interpretation of his journey within/through the world in such a way as to deliberately contradict the onscreen imagery. While this is undertaken more as a facet of Henry's desire to make himself appear less violent and guilty, and not so much because he is as under the spell of the onscreen Westerner the way that JR and Charlie are, the multiple diegetic references to Western films, and the famous *Great Train Robbery* (1903) homage at the end suggests that the Western influence is never far outside the frame.

Certainly, Henry is, by his blood, a man in the middle, permanently excluded from full membership in the gangster community by his half-Irish heritage. Yet the fact that his mother's family "came from the same part of Sicily" as did Paulie's provides Henry with the Westerner's inherent duality "at the meeting point of civilization and savagery" (Cawelti 20), which excludes him from either but allows him to exist in an intermediate space and travel between the two. Henry, more so than the Westerner, uses this stance for his personal gain, claiming to be influenced by "only the good half" of his personality — although the 'good half,' of course, shifts to align with whichever group to which he is seeking admission or from which he seeks acceptance. This exclusion based on ethnicity is slightly ironic, as the original screen gangsters were denied the "'normal' possibilities of happiness and achievement" (Warshow 136) based on their ethnicity and (often) immigrant status.

It must be noted that, as a story based on factual events, Henry's exclusion from the gangster society should not, itself, be implicitly understood as Westernness. However, the film explicitly and continually references Henry's status as outside the outsiders, "associated [like the savages] with lawlessness, a love of violence, and rejection of [a traditional] settled way of life" (Cawelti 35), yet, at the same time, remaining forever apart from the gangsters of the neighborhood. Les Keyser confirms this was not accidental, explaining that Nicholas Pileggi, co-screenwriter and author of the source material "emphasized Henry's special viewpoint, clearly within and yet peculiarly outside the gang…. 'Henry was a thug, but he was a visiting thug'" (199). This concerted, deliberate emphasis on the outsider's view suggests this position is integral to the film's narrative, imbuing Henry's onscreen experiences with an essential Westernness.

The film's basis in fact further supports its Western recontextualization; as Cawelti notes, "the Western is a story that takes place in or near a frontier… and generally set at a particular moment in the past" (20). This "particular moment in the past" for *GoodFellas* is the so-called "Apalachin Summit" meeting on November 14th, 1957, in which an estimated 100 of the highest ranking North Eastern Mafia members convened at one's country home, located in the small upstate town of Apalachin, New York. Briefly, law enforcement, suspicious of the inordinate number of out-of-state license plates suddenly seen on expensive, flashy sedans, raided the house, catching the bosses unaware and arresting a majority of the attendees.

The event is recognized as a pivotal point in the history of the Italian Mafia's presence in America for two main reasons. First, it was no longer possible for those on either side of the law to deny the existence of an intricate, organized criminal enterprise, thus changing the way in which cases were built and charges were brought against suspected mafiosi (eventually culminating in 1970's RICO Act). Second, one of the issues purported to be on the meeting's agenda, but one which had not been discussed prior to its unexpected adjournment, was

whether or not the drug trafficking trade was to be an officially 'sanctioned' activity in which Mafia members could participate. Though the justification for the Mafia requiring members to keep away from the drug trade stems from the much harsher punishments when caught, rather than any upstanding respectability or morality concerns, by 1957, it seems enough members were involved that their superiors were (allegedly) considering repealing the drug business ban. (This is not to suggest the proposed switch was not self serving; reversing such an edict would mean that the higher-ups could demand a percentage of the sales, akin to states' taxations of recently legalized marijuana.)

This aborted summit meeting is often cited, by historians and gangsters themselves, as the end of an era, marking the point at which the civility and respectability of the 'good old days' gave way to the disorderly, out-of-hand savagery of subsequent years, where the honor among thieves disintegrated into every man for himself, with drugs often seen as being chiefly responsible.

This suggests the frontier Cawelti speaks of should not be understood to be a physical location, but a cultural one. As does the Western, *GoodFellas* takes place "in a 'liminal' moment of… cultural history [where] the myth of the West," here by substituting the West for a more innocuous and wholesome, but ultimately romanticized gangster community, can "no longer establish meaning… [or] help us to see our way through the modern world" (Cawelti 145). *GoodFellas* opens in 1955, in the "glorious time" Henry explicitly locates "before Apalachin," and his downfall, famously, is precipitated though his involvement in drugs, both taking and selling. It should be noted that the only other reference to Apalachin likewise occurs in Henry's narration (surreptitiously, he insists that "Paulie *hated* conferences"). This narration, which Annette Wernblad calls "the entire point" of *GoodFellas*" (42), is implicitly retrospective, "express[ing] a sense of loss associated with the passage of a simpler and less ambiguous era while

acknowledging its inevitability" (Cawelti 92); examining the same unresolvable tensions as does the Western.

Of course, Henry's voiceover functions not only as a brush of nostalgia, but it quite literally establishes the character as a mediating force between the viewer (as emissaries of normal 'civilization') and the lifestyle depicted (complete with 'savage' neighborhood natives). Keyser argues that what he sees as "Ray Liotta's somewhat flat performance" in the role serves to shift the focus from the individual to the collective: "as a person [Henry] counts for little…. This seemingly central character was merely the point of access to… the world of the wiseguys" (201). He brings us in, shows us around, introduces us to his pals and lets us tag along to the parties, but keeps us at a safe distance from the things we really should not know about, the things we really should not see. Through his privileged voiceover, he controls our opinions of the onscreen events and of the other characters: although Henry tells us that Jimmy Conway (Robert De Niro) was "one of the most feared guys in the City" who started "doing hits for mob bosses when he was 16," we do not see Jimmy behaving any more violently or aggressively than any of the others in Henry's world, and he does not do anything especially vicious until the Batts murder. (From our vantage point, Tommy [Joe Pesci] is a more likely candidate to be considered "one of the most feared guys in the City.")

When analyzing Henry's narration, it is imperative that we remember it exists only because it is his spoken testimony at Paulie and Jimmy's trial. He has a very vested interest in convincing the viewers (read: proxy-jurors) that he is "less violent or insensitive that his friends" (Wernblad 42), so his motives for presenting "an image of personal nobility" (Warshow 141) are less likely to correlate directly with the Westerner's concern for "the purity of his own image [or] his honor" (Warshow 140) as they are rooted in a selfish desire to "make us like him… to exonerate himself, to wash his hands of the whole thing and disclaim responsibility" (Wernblad 42-3). Certainly, Henry's position as narrator affords him complete control over the direction of

the story. “He alone decides which doors, trunks and closets are opened for us to look into and which are not… [making] him omniscient and omnipotent” (Wernblad 42). This control, coupled with the courtroom setting’s (ostensibly) inherent claims to truthfulness, encourages the viewer to believe that which Henry puts forth. This advantage is not lost on Henry. As Wernblad’s discussion of the myriad discrepancies between what is said and what is seen proves, Henry often purposely crafts the viewer’s impressions of him towards a more civilized interpretation. In particular, there are three aspects of this narration/testimony that are worth exploring further here, as they seem to consciously align him with the Westerner, even if, at bottom, he is only hoping to save himself.

The first of which is simply his presence and role in the courtroom proceedings. The very fact that he is “ratting” means he is cooperating with the law against the savagery of the gangsters. In doing so, Henry reinforces the idea that, while he “possess[es] many qualities and skills of the savages, [he remains] fundamentally committed to the townspeople” (Cawelti 29). His participation in the trial (at least, superficially) confirms that, like the Westerner, he actively and (somewhat) willingly contributes to ushering in law and order, “even if [by doing so, he] puts him[self] out of a job” (Cawelti 20).

Because he controls our interpretations throughout the film, he is able to ensure that he is constantly shown as a mediator; from the time he is first pinched selling cigarettes, Henry is always the one attempting to smooth things over, calm things down, straighten things out. However, the amount of effort Henry spends (or, rather, the degree to which Henry wants the audience to see his efforts) arbitrating between Jimmy and Morrie (Chuck Low) is particularly interesting, given Morrie's low importance to the narrative. Morrie is not a criminal ‘earner’ for the gang, he seems to borrow more money than he ever pays back, and his annoying personality appears to be tolerated more than encouraged, therefore Henry has no justification within the narrative to continually advocate on Morrie’s behalf.

However, if anything, Morrie is the sole male representative of an outside, 'civilized' world. He is a regular guy running a small business, and though he does seem to owe money to some dangerous people, his overall quality of life does not seem to be suffering. Indeed, his wife's (Margo Winkler) insistence that "in 27 years, he's never been away all night without calling" perfectly demonstrates the domesticating influence of civilization that the Westerner ultimately flees/rejects. Therefore, by reiterating just how often he stepped in and tried to mediate Jimmy's savagery from Morrie's civility, Henry's actions can be understood to reflect the Westerner's "basic commitment to domesticity [and civilization]" (Cawelti 35). Of course, to Wernblad's point, as Henry tells us he had planned "to talk Jimmy out of killing Morrie," we see him occupied by a poker game, not fretting over Morrie's impending murder, calling into question whether or not Henry's claim was true. Nonetheless, the fact that he makes a point to repeatedly imply his concern for such an extraneous schmuck suggests a calculated effort to display his commitment to the wider, civilized community.

The final scene in which Henry's narration seems to recall the Western hero is, perhaps counterintuitively, the murder of Billy Batts (Frank Vincent). As Wernblad notes, "the fact that Henry begins the story with [the murder] proposes that it is the major turning point" (46) in the narrative, the single event which precipitates Henry's downfall. Importantly, this an event Henry had very little to do with, if he is to be believed. He simply controls access to the spaces: locking the club's front door and later opening the trunk. He "looks on worriedly" (Wernblad 46) while the violence takes place, a look he wears throughout dinner. Later, when the trio must exhume the corpse, he becomes physically ill and is unable to proceed, while Jimmy and Tommy jovially continue with their digging. All of this seems designed to support Henry's insistence that, "he is a reluctant killer who shoots only when he is forced to it" (Cawelti 41), echoing the Westerner, who is likewise "initially reluctant. He dislikes violence for its own sake and therefore the villain must force violence upon him" (Cawelti 55).

In reality, as Wernblad notes, “things start snowballing as a consequence of Henry’s own choices and actions” (46); namely Henry’s carelessness in seeing his mistress. This, not Batts’ murder, results in the trip to Florida, where Henry’s own actions ultimately lead to the prison sentence where he begins his foray into drugs. Yet, instead of the film beginning with Henry and Jimmy dangling the bad debtor (Peter Onorati) into the lion enclosure, it starts with Batts’ death, suggesting from its outset that, unlike Jimmy and Tommy, Henry was simply a victim of circumstance, “drawn into the conflict that will destroy him” (Cawelti 37) by happenstance.

While we must take into account that he has very important ulterior motives for doing so, the film (and, by extension, Henry) nonetheless knowingly, willfully and efficaciously constructs his story in a way to portray him as a mediating man in the middle, an outsider whose efforts to keep the peace between the various factions were simply not enough. Caught as he was, in the New York mob landscape on the brink of collapse, from both internal (drugs) and external (Apalachin) forces, he purposefully crafts for us, his jury, an image of himself as a fated man “whose day is over” but who nonetheless “plays out the drama because it is what he ‘has to do’” before “fad[ing] away again into the more distant West” (Warshow 148, 150).

And of course, that is exactly Henry’s fate, as he is exiled to a nondescript, pre-fab subdivision in the middle of nowhere, certainly located west of New York. Like the late Westerner, Henry is removed from the community when it is clear that he will not remove himself; he has been banished. As Les Keyser astutely observes, “the mood resembles the silence at the end of Stephen Crane’s ‘The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky’ as… the child of the Old West resigns himself to the coming of law and order and drags his weary feet away” (208). But unlike Charlie’s banishment, whose adherence to his stringent and unbending personal code of honor is itself responsible for his incompatibly with his neighborhood society, Henry explicitly breaks his code, thus confirming his society has no more use for him.

While Henry's lifestyle appears to be governed by many rules, his true code demands only that he "never rat on [his] friends and always keep [his] mouth shut." Any other decree, it seems, is can be broken at will, even 'laws' imposed by higher-ups, and indeed, it is only after Henry breaks the code of silence that he is ejected. Even the selling of drugs does not carry the same weight or punishment. It is, after all, a "law, the sum of society's standards" which, even coming from Paulie, "represents the very thing this mythology [of both the Westerner and the gangster] sought to avoid" (Ray 62). Certainly Jimmy was likewise participating in the drug trade, from which he experiences no retribution, and Henry is allowed close access to, and even money from, Paulie after his drug trafficking is exposed. While 'illegal' in his society, the 'code' of the Henry's crew was 'do not rat,' not 'do not sell drugs,' which in the film acknowledges as a business enterprise. "The film is about money… the gangster's job is to make money," Scorsese emphasizes, (Keyser 200) echoing the screen gangster's traditional position as a" dynamic, self reliant individual applying himself int he only profitable and engaging occupation available" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 89).

The Westerner is likewise understood to have an "ambivalence about the law, [which he understands to be] a collective impersonal ideology imposed on the individual from without," despite an overall pro-social position, and it is not uncommon for even the most upstanding Westerner to break 'unjust' societal laws that run counter to his code, as "natural law allows [for] disobeying the laws of man" (Ray 61-2). Therefore, although Henry engaged in an act forbidden by Paulie and punishable by death, by doing so he has only transgressed against an "ideology imposed… from without" (Ray 62), he did not (yet) infringe upon his own code, which only commands his silence. Further, since the move into drugs is a business move designed to make money, in a film "about money," and the gangster is, by his nature, a "somewhat misguided… [though] ambitious, profit-minded American male" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 84-5), Henry's disobedience is justified; he is merely "disobeying the laws of man" that contradict and constrain

his natural self. That Henry was not killed (or ordered dead) by Paulie, who no doubt had ample opportunities to do so, further confirms that his removal is a result of breaking his code of silence, rather than Paulie's law, and can be understood through a Western lens.

Finally, unlike the gangster figure, whose 'death in the gutter' at the end of the film serves as a "consummate reaffirmation of his own identity" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 90), Henry survives his ordeal. Whereas the gangster "is bound to go on until he is killed" (Warshow 143), Henry merely gives up, relinquishing any trace of the "anarchy [that] runs deep within his character" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 89), seemingly without too much coercing. No longer the "irrational, aggressive social animal" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 110) whose "whole life [has been spent in] an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd" (Warshow 133), Henry ends the film in a state of meek, beaten passivity. That the "dynamic, self reliant individual… [who] resents conforming to any organization" (Schatz *Hollywood Genres* 89) ultimately allows society to force him to live in a place where "egg noodles and ketchup" pass for "decent food," denied the "inalterable [outcome in which] the gangster lies dead" (Warshow 132), seems an especially fitting punishment for a man who "always wanted to be a gangster."

Additionally, *GoodFellas* picks up where *Mean Streets* leaves off by recontextualizing the Western ritual of the community dance, which *GoodFellas* seems to locate, ironically, in prison — specifically, the meal preparation scene. The tone in this sequence sets it apart from all others, comes the closest to demonstrating the "community worth saving" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 137) that the ritual was originally intended to display. Like the earlier films in this study, this 'dance' is exclusively male. It is a prison, after all, which further inverts the notion that anything these men represent is worth preserving. However, there is no hint of the hedonism, menace and aggression that mark the other films' dances, and it does not devolve into violence. Rather, it is as close as any of the films in this study get to an idealized image of domestic bliss as the men, dressed in bathrobes, aprons and shorts, work together to prepare a communal

dinner. Instead of pitting “male savagery… against the cultured world of women and home” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 51), the scene seamlessly integrates the two opposites, without needing to bring an actual woman into the mix. This is a “pure marriage of males, sexless and holy” (Fielder 211) which reflects “the Western hero’s true social milieu: … a group of masculine comrades” (Cawelti 42). Again, this study is not concerned with any possible sexual subtexts of such scenes, but rather the almost wholesome, familiar atmosphere, arguably buoyed by Henry’s surrogate father Paulie, who at one point sits alone at the head of the table with a glass of Scotch while the others bustle about, and by Scorsese’s own father, Charles, in the role of Vinnie. And indeed, these men *are* Henry’s community. They have been his family from the time he was a preteen, and it was they who blessed and accepted his marriage to Karen, when both biological families disapproved (Keyser 210). They, too, are the ones in need of saving, as it is that exact community, those exact men, whom Henry harms when he breaks his silence.

Likewise, Karen’s position within the film appears to resemble more the “nightmare inversion” (Warshow 137) of the Western woman’s role as a harbinger of domesticity. That her point of view is privileged enough for a share of the voiceover narration confirms that she is not simply a possession, to be “considered part of [Henry’s] winnings” (Warshow 138) as we would expect if her purpose was that of a gangster’s moll. Like the Western woman who often comes from the East, “represent[ing] a clash of cultures” (Warshow 137), Karen is a Jewish girl from outside the neighborhood, and is thus “someone who is closer to us and our perspective, with whom we can safely identify [and who] confirms our impressions of this tribal family and their insularity” (Wernblad 45), since by the time she shows up, Henry has thoroughly been absorbed into the gang life. Karen, too, quickly acquiesces, as her initial stance towards both Henry and then her fellow mob wives shifts from disgust to one of normality and camaraderie.

Thus, in *GoodFellas*, as “in the modern Western, the central female character usually come to see the necessity of masculine ethos- and even in certain cases, to share it” (Cawelti

152). Cawelti notes that this “conversion of the female to the new ethos of violence and rugged individualism” usually happens when she “sees her husband physically threatened” (152-3). Certainly Karen readily accepts Henry’s lifestyle, but it is not until she understands herself and her husband to be in physical danger from Jimmy that we witness Henry breaking his code. Whether or not we believe that Henry would not have gone through with his testimony if Karen did not accompany him, the fact remains that she did not “see the necessity” nor share his willingness to break his code until Jimmy’s threat was made real.

However, like Teresa before her, Karen is hardly a model for “the values of the past: … family, home and community” (Cawelti 152). But while Teresa’s desire for independence was not so much undermining the Western woman’s role as recontextualizing it, Karen is a rotting corruption of the virtue, refinement, domesticity and civility Western women represent. The longest exclusively female sequence reveals the women to be caustic and abrasive, and just as violent and abusive as the men, as they gossip about their friends, badmouth their husbands and complain about “beating their kids with broom handles and leather belts and that the kids still didn’t pay any attention.” Instead of demonstrating “the graces of civilization” (Warshow 138), the women “had bad skin and wore too much makeup…. They looked beat up… thrown together and cheap.” Karen herself soon becomes just as materialistic and hollow, becoming “a prostitute in her own home” (Wernblad 45) simply for a wad of cash to blow on a mindless shopping spree; her purchases so trivial we never learn what they are, only what she had to do to get them. Karen drags her children along to harasses Henry’s mistress, smuggles drugs and other contraband into prison, uses her own mother’s house to hide illegal guns on two separate occasions, and her cocaine use appears to be on something of a comparable level to Henry’s. In general, her lack of participation in the murders is perhaps the only thing that keeps her from being just as abhorrent as the gangsters themselves. Karen ends the film “a mentally abused

woman who felt she had no place to go… winc[ing] conspicuously when she slides the small pistol into her panties" (Keyser 211) in a futile attempt to shield Henry from his own actions.

Finally, like all of Scorsese's gangster/Western fusions after *Mean Streets*, *GoodFellas* contains a prominent supporting character who personifies the gangster, here best understood as Tommy. Certainly, he is the only one of the main gangster characters whose death completes the gangster arc's conditions, but like Charlie and Johnny Boy's symbiotic Western/gangster relationship, Wernblad names Tommy as Henry's shadow brother. Following her claim that Henry is a "master manipulator" (43), both he and Tommy can be understood as psychopaths, though Tommy's "pre-eminence lies in the suggestion that he may at any moment lose control" (Warshow 140), rather than the utmost control Henry has in shaping the audience's interpretations. For as much as Henry claims Jimmy as "one of the most feared guys in the City," it is Tommy's "irrational brutality" (Warshow 132) that we are witness to. "Since we do not see the rational and routine aspects of the gangster's behavior, the practice of brutality… becomes the totality of his career…. Thus the brutality itself becomes at once the means to success and the content of success" (Warshow 132).

Indeed Tommy's brutality is his downfall; his inability to control his hair-trigger temper in reaction to Batts is the catalyst for his own death, defining him as a "willful individualist [who]… unwittingly seals his own fate…. His death results from his own inability to sustain his code [and] his violation invariably is generated by a commitment to the gang-family" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 93). By killing a made man, and going against the laws of the gangster society, "Tommy is destroyed by his own dream…. He does the one thing that makes [becoming a made man] impossible" (Keyser 204).

While it is logical to understand the gangster figure as analogous to the savage in the Western, who is likewise "associated with lawlessness, a love of violence and a rejection of the town's settled way of life," Cawelti also notes that "another important aspect of savagery is its

close relationship to madness" (35), demonstrated in Tommy's willingness to shoot first, and pleasure in both threatening and causing indiscriminate harm.

Ironically, this savage aspect of the gangster persona places Tommy as a threat to the (relatively) respectable facade of civilization that the (gangster) community seeks to attain. His brash, aggressive style of violence is seen as antiquated, embodying the "self-reliant individuality which [gangster] society cannot tolerate" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 75). In order for their society to move forward, they must remove him, exemplifying the condition in which Westerner invariably finds himself. In drawing such blatant parallels between the two figures, the film inherently demonstrates that "the cowboy's distant fears have now become the gangster's daily angst" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85).

While *GoodFellas* lacks the more overt references and allusions to Westerns that mark the earlier gangster/Western films, there are two important exceptions, both of which center around Tommy. The first occurs during the poker game in which Tommy ultimately ends up shooting Spider (Michael Imperioli) in the foot. As the crew tries to come up with the title of "that movie that Bogart made, the one where he played a cowboy," both *Shane* (1953) and *The Oklahoma Kid* (1939) are offered. The latter is the title Tommy was searching for, but it should be noted that, while the film stars both Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney, both of whom were known for their gangster/criminal roles, it is by Bogart, who plays the outlaw/gangster character in the film, that Tommy remembers the film. (Both also co-starred in Raoul Walsh's *The Roaring Twenties* that same year, but the gangster film is conspicuously absent from the conversation.) That, coupled with Tommy assuming the role of the outlaw/savage in insisting Spider "dance" his order back by shooting at his feet, his earlier cowboy mannerisms celebrating a successful truck heist, as well his registered disbelief/disgust at Jimmy's guess of *Shane,* suggests that Tommy knows exactly what role he occupies. Unlike Henry, who tries to present himself as the good guy, Tommy not only accepts, but revels in his bad guy status.

Of course, the next time either the viewer or the characters see Spider, he is murdered by Tommy, marking the first truly unjustified killing in the film. Though Batts' death was certainly undeserved in that moment, as a 'made guy' he, too, was a gangster, and therefore marred with a kind of 'gangster original sin.' Having lived a life of crime, a 'death in the gutter' eventually awaited him as well. Spider, however, is as close to 'innocent' as anyone in the neighborhood can be. He was never a gangster, but a kid serving drinks, echoing Henry's role when he (and by extension, the viewer) was first introduced to Jimmy. His death, therefore, affirms Tommy's unpredictable madness and ultimate irredeemability. Tommy is, unapologetically, a gangster. An outlaw. A savage. And thus, there is but one inevitable outcome: death.

The second explicit Western reference is, of course, the penultimate shot in which Tommy, long dead in the diegetic world, returns to fire at the camera, *a la The Great Train Robbery,* a film Cawelti considers to be "the first significant Western on film" (79). This homage has no definitive consensus among fans or critics, but for our purposes, it seems to end the film by confirming that "the Western cannot be separated from the gangster film" (Reed & Thompson). By remaining true to himself and his nature, Tommy returns, "not a man, but a style of life, a kind of meaning" (Warshow 133). Ironically, this is what Henry always wanted but, by his true nature, cannot have. Henry spent the film consciously positioning himself as a mediating force, merely a bystander on the edge of the frontier watching as the inevitable civility encroached on a more savage, but ultimately freer way of life. But unlike the classic Westerner who rode into the sunset of his own volition, dignity intact, he is forcibly removed. Henry "fights… to state what he is" without knowing exactly what statement he wants to make, and thus, not only ends the film as a disgraced Westerner, pushed aside by the advancing society, but a failed gangster as well, imbuing Henry's final glance with "that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which [the film's initial] optimism itself helps to create" (Warshow 129).

## Casino

Twenty five years after its initial release, *Casino* still appears to be living in *GoodFellas*' shadow, as many fans and critics alike continue to see it as a mere reincarnation of the earlier film. Generally speaking, to focus solely on the films' shared creators and cast, and the similar time periods, subject matters and lifestyles depicted is to overlook the differences in the films' exploration of their worlds and the ultimate conclusions they draw. However, for the purposes of this study, both *GoodFellas* and *Casino* approach the gangster/Western fusion through remarkably similar channels (the latter film upping the ante significantly, as one might expect). Just as in *GoodFellas, Casino* presents its protagonist, Ace Rothstein (Robert De Niro) in a way that plainly reflects the Western hero. He, like Henry, is an ethnic outsider, positioned at the end of an era, who both mediates conflicts between the savage gangsters and the outside civilization and serves as a middleman between the lavishly excessive Las Vegas lifestyle and the viewer by way of his voiceover narration. Ultimately, like Henry, Ace's split allegiances between the savagery of the gangsters and the ostensible respectability of the Las Vegas civilization facilitate his banishment. Further, like *GoodFellas*, which saw Henry's Westerner doubled by Tommy's savage/gangster figure, here, Ace is likewise doubled by Nicky, another savage/gangster figure played by Joe Pesci, who fully embodies the gangster's savage attitude and fully completes the gangster's tragic arc.

*Casino* is, fundamentally, a film about excess. Such excess is generally discussed through the film's violence, which Scorsese agrees "exceeded what [he had] previously done in the realm of brutality" (Schickel 202). Yet, this excessiveness extends to our concerns as well, for in extending the roles' inherent similarities to their furthest logical extension and exploring the point at which the gangster and the Westerner become inextricable from one another,

*Casino* stands as one of the most exemplary sites where "the two genres coexist as part of the same surface" (Reed & Thompson).

Indeed, one of the central tenets of the film seems to be the extremely complex, intricate relationship between the two; when each sticks to his assigned role, things run smoothly and everyone profits and succeeds. Yet, as the film progresses, it becomes increasingly harder to separate the gangster from the Westerner in either Ace or Nicky; Ace begins to behave more like a gangster, and Nicky finds himself increasingly in a mediating role. Seemingly as a result, their worlds become progressively unbalanced and things spiral, irreparably, out of control. The more Ace and Nicky try to push each other away, placing sole blame on the other without recognizing their own responsibility in the increasingly wrecked state of their world, the more out-of-control things become, suggesting each is essential to the other; the gangster cannot exist without the Westerner, just as, to paraphrase Nicky, *Casino*'s Westerner needs the gangster in order to function. (Of course, a major factor in this decentering is Ginger [Sharon Stone], herself a site in which the Westerner's dancehall girl and the gangster's moll coexist.) That this conflict plays out in Las Vegas upholds Cawelti's assertion that the "Western setting [is an] appropriate symbolic context for the way in which the characters attempted to cross conventional personal and social frontiers. That [this] quest… ended in disaster suggests the strength of the traditional boundaries these characters seek to cross" (113).

So, unlike the previous gangster films in this study, for which I have argued that a clear Western foundation can be discerned for the protagonists' character and journey, separating him from the traditional gangster figures with whom he surrounds himself, no such distinctions can be made for *Casino*. Rather, this film focuses on the symbiotic closeness and interdependency of the gangster and Westerner's relationship and the ease with which one can morph, almost imperceptibly, into the other, confirming their parallel impetus. This chapter, therefore, explores the ways in which the gangster and Westerner aspects of both Ace and

Nicky cannot be separated and extricated from each other. That *Casino,* the film Scorsese intended to be his exit from the gangster milieux, is the film in which this occurs is unsurprising. Whether or not it was intentional, it is interesting that the director's "final statement" (Schickel 203) on those characters and that world reinforces our understanding that there is little difference between the gangster and Westerner beyond their "costume and the arena in which they demonstrate their prowess" (Bazin 143).

Speaking with Charlie Rose, Scorsese himself admits approaching the film as something of "an urban Western" — not in the term's earlier connotation of taking the Westerner into an urban environment, (as some critics and scholars claim *Taxi Driver* does) but in bringing the urban setting West. Certainly, from the very opening shot, the 2.35:1 widescreen aspect ratio seeks to color the viewer's interpretation of the events, literally, through a Western lens, formally recalling the CinemaScope Westerns of the 1950s. (But, unlike the Westerns of the 50s, which Robert B. Ray understands to display a "distaste for outlaw hero's values" [168-9], *Casino*, by its gangster nature, embraces them, as we shall soon see.) Though many films were, and continue to be, shot in widescreen, the ratio is particularly associated with the Western genre. As Robert Kolker observes, it is a format in which Scorsese rarely shoots (203); thus, for a cinephile like Scorsese, such a formal evocation must be read as intentional, especially since the director explicitly equates "the end of [the mob's control] of Vegas" with which the film in chiefly concerned, with "the end of the Wild West… when things were wide open" (Rose).

And then, of course, there is "the desert landscape of the West, [which] is seen as a terrain where individuals can escape from the past and limits of tradition" (Cawelti 112). Indeed, this is the driving factor behind both Ace and Nicky's relocation to Vegas; Ace notes that "back home, they'd throw me in jail. Out here, they're giving me awards," and Nicky describes Vegas to be "wide open" and "untouched," offering "bookies, pimps and drug dealers" ripe for shaking

down. In the Western, as in *Casino*, the desert functions as "a symbolic landscape in which the vastness and openness of nature and the challenge of violent situations and lawless men could lead to a rebirth of heroic individual morality" (Cawelti 89) and stands "as a serious antithesis to [the] existing society" (Cawelti 21) of the glitz and glamor, the shimmering artificiality and out of control excess that is the Las Vegas community.

Further, as Ace explains, "it's in the desert where lots of the town's problems are solved," confirming that, while the Westerner's adherence to "natural law allows [for] disobeying the laws of man" (Ray 61-2), the inverse is not true. The law of man in ineffectual next to the natural laws. While the city of Las Vegas is painted as a fully corrupt place, down to its last cop, valet and bell hop, the desert is where business is handled with finality. The desert then, existing as it does outside of the control of the corrupt city or of 'civilized' culture in general, is inscribed with the same foundational purity that any Western frontier possesses. Like other Western frontiers, it, too, is under the jurisdiction of the gangster/savage character, and is thus a dangerous place for those from 'civilization' to find themselves.

While the desert can, and often does, represent both (positive) freedom and (negative) danger in a singular work, those works whose deserts are construed more threateningly generally position the town as its antithesis, a plentiful center of community to offset the desert's barrenness. Certainly, our first glimpse of the city might appear to fall into that category, as we fly over, bearing witness to an oasis of city light against the desert's dark nothingness. However, as we soon learn, Las Vegas is anything but a lush garden of civilized domesticity. Created by the hand of man and corrupted by sin and vice, the city is arguably more depraved and dangerous than the desert. The desert, meanwhile, was created by nature and is not inherently good or bad, it simply is.

Sticking closely to Western tradition, *Casino* presents "the West as a pastoral tradition threatened by modernity" (Cawelti 113). The film clearly positions itself at the end of an era[3], both "establish[ing] a sense of continuity between the present and the past … [while] explor[ing] what was gained, but also what was lost at that moment in history" (Cawelti 49). In the final sequence, as Ace suggests that the cold, sterile, aliening corporatized 'civilizing' of Vegas that moved in on their heels is more dangerous and corrosive to society, he notes that "while the kids play cardboard pirates, Mommy and Daddy drop the house payments and Junior's college money on the poker slots," recalling and contrasting an earlier scene in which Nicky gave a degenerate gambler cash in order to turn the electricity back on at his family's house. Though the film spends three hours displaying the unchecked hedonism, drug-fueled debauchery, greed and excess that directly contributed to the (literal) implosions we are now watching, Ace, through his narration, instead focuses the viewer's attention on the positives that were lost, echoing the (none too) "subtle feeling of regret that a more heroic life is passing" (Cawelti 93) shared by the old Westerner looking back on his glory days. Like many later Westerns, Casino "celebrate[s] the work of the original people who built the West and then saw it transformed into something else" (Cawelti 114).

Much like *GoodFellas, Casino*'s voiceover narration is overtly retrospective, echoing the "gradual fading of [an] optimistic vision… [that] characterizes the evolution of the Western genre" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 50). Indeed, the film begins by acknowledging that it will end in the destruction of the world to which we have just been introduced, emphasizing its inescapably. Before we are five minutes into the film, (less than two minutes, if one discounts the title credit sequence) we see Ace's car explode, he explicitly takes responsibility for getting himself "blown up," and Nicky, a character who we do not yet know will not survive the film,

[3] In fact, the film itself represented the end of an era for nearly two and a half decades, marking the last collaboration between De Niro and Scorsese until 2019's *The Irishman.*

informs us that they "fucked it all up… [so bad] that it turned out to be the last time street guys… were ever given anything that fucking valuable again," reflecting Warshow's "sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism [especially on a Vegas scale] itself helps to create" (129). Just as the Western viewer watches from a present position, secure in the knowledge that civilization will eventually triumph over savagery, *Casino*'s audience understands, at the outset, that this conflict is no longer being played out; "we know advancing civilization will eliminate that threat" (Cawelti 22). In *Casino*, as "in the Western formula, savagery is implicitly understood to be on the way out" (Cawelti 20), and we can thus enjoy the lawlessness and brutality depicted, secure in our knowledge that this "state outside society, [this] 'territory' or wilderness which cannot last… must inevitably give way to the maturity of civilization," (Cawelti 61) and that our present position is on the other side of that maturation.

That both the Westerner and the gangster "grudgingly recognize the inevitability of social progress" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 63) is further confirmed by Nicky's and Ace's narration, which echo each other's sense of melancholy nostalgia, as each is, at least initially, clearly designated as the gangster figure and Western hero, respectively. Like Tommy in *GoodFellas*, Ace maintains that "Nicky loved being a gangster" and he proves to be extremely adept at it, embodying seemingly every qualification Robert Warshow laid forth. He is "expansive and noisy… crude… but by no means inarticulate" (136), as even when firing expletives and threats a mile a minute at Ace, Charley the banker (Richard Riehle), and the countless others who anger him, his speech maintains an elegance of expression that the profanities may initially mask. While Nicky's "irrational brutality" (Warshow 132) is largely responsible for *Casino*'s ultra-violent reputation, "his commitment to enterprise is always clear" (Warshow 136). In fact, it is generally in pursuit (or protection) of revenue-generating operations that his violence occurs; as a demonstration of "Nicky's dedication to his job," we see him kicking a man in an alley. Though "his career is [understood as] a nightmare inversion of the values of ambition and opportunity"

(137), he nonetheless embraces it with the same zeal and passion as would any "profit minded American male" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 84).

Of course, for our purposes, Nicky's association "with lawlessness, [his] love of violence and rejection of the town's settled way of life" perfectly align him with the savage, who "more positively, [is able] to live and move freely in the wilderness, master… the tools of violence and [possesses a] strong masculinity" (Cawelti 35), the latter of which is weaponized far more effectively against Ace.

Certainly Nicky, like all the other characters who Las Vegas touches, goes overboard, caught in a vortex of excess, and completes the gangster's arc, winding up dead; his "is a story of enterprise and success ending in precipitate failure" (Warshow 135). In keeping with the gangster/Western synthesis, however, he does not end the film dead in an urban street gutter, the victim of rival gangs or the police, nor is he killed by the tools of the city (guns). Instead, he is bludgeoned by "his closest friends… his closest collaborators and [surrogate] family members" (Schickel 203), and buried, still breathing, in a Midwestern corn field. Despite having fled the "urban environment, with its institutionalized alienation… the intangible forces of social order and civilization which have created the modern city" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85) have caught up with and finally overwhelmed the gangster, "with [an] almost mechanical inevitability" (Warshow 143). After all, for Nicky, "there is really only one possibl[e outcome]" (Warshow 133).

Further, as Schatz notes, "anarchy runs deep within [the gangster's] character and he resents conforming to any organization, regardless of its ideological persuasion" (*Hollywood Genres* 89). In going against the bosses' wishes that Ace continue to earn them money, (for which, he would need to be alive) Nicky's attempt on his life can be interpreted as "an effort to assert himself as an individual… and [the gangster] always dies because he is an individual" (Warshow 133). Thus "his very death is the consummate reaffirmation of his identity" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 89).

For his part, Ace is, like Henry, unmistakably the ethnic outsider, excluded from membership in the gangster society through the 'basic incompatibility' of his Jewish heritage, which becomes increasingly a point of contention as things spiral further out of control. More so than any of the other Westerners in this study, Ace is "fundamentally committed" (Cawelti 29) to civilization while associating with, working for, and possessing skills the savage gangster community desires and utilizes. For him, his job and, by extension, his life, for he seems to have no other interests outside of gambling and casino operations, "is unavoidably serious" (Warshow 137). Indeed, Nicky suggests multiple times that Ace's approach to gambling is so removed and calculated that he does not enjoy it the way 'regular' people do. Ace, like "the Westerner, imposes himself by the appearance of unshakable control" (Warshow 140) and uses his language "with precise and powerful effectiveness" (Cawelti 41), leading to an air of "loneliness [that] is organic, not imposed on him by his situation, but belonging to him intimately and testifying to his completeness" (Warshow 137).

Perhaps ironically, given Ginger's role in the disintegration of the 'Old Vegas,' Ace seems to share the Westerner's "reluctance towards women" (Cawelti 42). He is "not… compelled to seek love" (Warshow 137) and his arrangement with Ginger appears to be completely transactional and businesslike. He first introduces her to the viewer by declaring that "her mission in life was money," and after acknowledging that "[her] love costs money," we see him quite literally pay her a dowry in jewelry and clothing. She initially refuses his marriage proposal, on the very explicit grounds that she does not love him, yet he is willing to proceed matter-of-factly with a relationship built upon mutual respect, (despite her lacking that as well) as if it were a marketplace transaction. Though the couple do conceive a daughter, which Nicky interprets as simply a matter of Ace "cover[ing] his bets" before going through with the marriage, we are never witness to one scene of intimacy or genuine affection between them; that no other children are born in roughly a decade of marriage seems to support that. Even as the

relationship disintegrates, Ginger's allegations of Ace's infidelities remain unsubstantiated; we never see him engage with any woman in more than a professionally courteous manner. Though he is does appear in the casino's lounge with other women, they remain wholly anonymous, interchangeable, nameless figures who Ace regards with the same cool indifference as he does the other patrons of the Tangiers.

Although his interactions with women appear to be merely an extension of his work, his "association with the boys remain[s] one of the most important aspects of the hero's life and style" (Cawelti 43). While, once again, it is not the purpose of this study to suggest latent homoerotic subtexts, the fact that he "almost never appears without… a group of males" suggests that, like the Western hero, Ace's "true social milieu… is a group of masculine comrades" (Cawelti 42). Cawelti points out that "a strong emphasis on male bonding as always been an important tradition in the Western" and indeed, "the major emotions in the film are derived from [the disintegration and betrayal of the] male friendships" (123). Noting that Frank Rosenthal, the man on whom Ace's character is based, had two children, further suggests that Scorsese and Pileggi made a conscious effort to "play down the importance of women in a man's life" (Cawelti 121) and further emphasize the emotional impact and importance of the dissolution of the relationship between the male characters.

Ace is also clearly constructed as the mediating figure between the savagery of the gangster community and the ostensibly legitimate, 'square' civilization of Las Vegas. Of course, as the film demonstrates, the Las Vegas society is "more [the] insulated and self serving" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 51) corruption of domesticity and law and order that often defines the late Western community, and hardly the pure and righteous society which the classic Westerner helped to found. Although he is initially accepted by civilization, his gangster-affiliated past back home and his continued associating with Nicky serves as his 'basic incompatibility' with the town (at least in the eyes of the Gaming Control Board). Yet, as the film progresses,

Ace, like the Westerner, remains "fundamentally committed to the townspeople" (Cawelti 29), desiring to run the Tangiers legitimately, a major point of contention with Nicky, for whom the extra-legal aspects of stealing and plundering remain the most appealing.

Most tellingly, Ace ends the film "right back where [he] started," recalling the Westerner's ride off into the sunset after he has secured the town from the savage threat. This exit is understood as an expulsion, be it self-inflicted or imposed from without, as the savage aspects of his personality that helped him prevail render him unable to acquiesce to the town's new value system. Warshow remarks that is it ultimately "the march of civilization that forces the Westerner to move on" (141), and this is certainly the case by *Casino*'s end, as we come to understand how Ace's work fundamentally paved the way for the big corporations to create the (ostensibly) "family friendly" new Las Vegas of today. In this "triumph of civilization over savagery… we see [the Westerner's] sacrifices as a necessary contribution to progress…. even if this victory, as it often does, puts him out of a job" (Cawelti 20, 37).

Certainly, we are left to question the true benefit of this 'victory.' Even after everything we have witnessed, Ace still insists that the gangster-controlled 'Old Vegas' was a more wholesome, personal experience, where "dealers knew your name [and] what you drank" and even the violence was carried out in a more intimate manner. Like the frontier, Vegas was "a place where the original American traits of individual vigor, courage and enterprise" (Cawelti 73) could be expressed without limit. Now, under the guise of respectable civilization, corporations have sterilized and removed all of the excitement, danger and risks; the very things that made both Vegas and the frontier appealing in the first place. Ace specifically equates the New Vegas to Disneyland, echoing Cawelti's evaluation that the mythic West has become the tourists' "weekend package… the stuff of calendar landscapes and mail order catalogues" (118), completely removed from its former significance.

Like Charlie and Henry before him, Ace finds himself banished to the "more remote frontier" (Warshow 73) of San Diego, marking him as the "type of hero… who accepted exile because he could not ultimately reconcile the conflict between the town and his [code of] heroism" (Cawelti 44). This parallel becomes clearer when we understand Ace's 'personal code' to relate to his continued ability to earn money for "the gods back home." Though its connection to honor is questionable, it appears to be the only maxim to which Ace rigidly subscribes. Indeed, he (arguably[4]) never breaks it by putting himself into a position where he no longer earns, though the kickbacks, we are told, do become "lighter" as their world begins to crumble. Just as the late Westerner is expelled when his adherence to his code positions him opposite the town's new laws, Ace acknowledges that although he "could still pick winners and [he] could still make money for all kinds of people back home," the Vegas "community, now at an advanced stage of social development, has little need for his services" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 54), and thus, he seems to accept his banishment. After all, he is allowed to continue living his life in accordance with his code, and he fares better than either Nicky or Ginger.

However, as much as Nicky and Ace fulfill their respective roles as gangster and Westerner, they also embody traits of the other. While many of these traits become more apparent as the film progresses and as their world crumbles, some are present the entire duration. The first, and most noticeable, example of this is that Nicky, for all his gangsterisms, is given a voice over, which runs alongside Ace's and interacts with his throughout the film. This very clearly constructs him as just as much of a mediator between the viewer and events depicted as Ace. While we saw this dual narrator used in *GoodFellas*, it was fundamentally different; Karen does not comment on the action nearly as often as Nicky, for good reason. She

[4] It's unclear whether or not Ace's position as the host of the *Ace's High* television program actually affect his moneymaking potential, though it does expressly disobey the bosses' wish that his work be "quiet" and out of the spotlight.

is not privy to the events of his childhood, nor is she present for most of the gang's exploits, criminal or otherwise. More importantly, as Annette Wernblad argues, she functions as an audience surrogate, a non-native 'normal' adult who nonetheless is seduced, providing a more relatable point of entry than the teenaged Henry (45). Nicky does not provide any such surrogate; he is a fully formed gangster from the time we meet him, his viewpoint is (or should be) radically different from that of our own. More importantly, he is inextricably involved in nearly everything that happens onscreen; when not onscreen himself, he, more often than not, serves as a catalyst for the events.

Initially, Nicky's narrations aligns perfectly with Ace's and he able to interject, mid-sentence, into Ace's voice over without interrupting the flow or tone of the story. Yet as the narrative progresses, the voice overs tell increasingly divergent stories, confirming that Nicky is an independent mediator. He has his own story, and his own version of the events to impart upon the viewer and is not simply there to support Ace's telling. Indeed, after Nicky gets himself banned from every Las Vegas casino, his and Ace's activities and business dealings rarely overlap, yet Nicky does not disappear from the film. As we just noted, he remains an integral part of the plot. Rather than the gangster/savage supporting role that Tommy and Johnny Boy served to their respective Westerners' stories, Nicky himself is allowed to serve as a meeting point between the (ostensibly) civilized viewer and his own lived savagery. (And certainly, the fact that he is mediating from beyond the grave allows the audience to question whether it is the gangster's death, or the Westerner's expulsion that awaits him at *Casino*'s conclusion.)

Additionally, Nicky finds himself positioned as an onscreen mediator between Ginger and Ace long before he becomes sexually involved with her. This continues after their affair heats up, when, despite his physical relationship with Ginger, he continually advocates for Ginger to return to Ace, and for Ace to take her back. If we understand Ace to be an emissary of the frontier town, (corrupt though it may be) we might understand Nicky's actions to display his

(albeit, twisted) 'fundamental commitment to the townspeople' (Cawelti 29). His efforts to ensure that the marriage remain intact suggests that his actions are not designed to destroy Ace's marriage, an institution of domesticity and civility. Instead, Nicky is merely engaging with a saloon girl who shares his way of life (Warshow 138) and who did not retire.

Most importantly, however, the more ensconced and powerful Nicky becomes out West, the more he comes to be associated with Western symbols and language. He populates his gang with "desperadoes from back home," and repeatedly refers to the cultural environment of Las Vegas as "the Wild West." His headquarters is named the Gold Rush, an allusion to the westward expansion which his presence continues, and is decorated with the cow skulls and wagon wheels that conjure the mythic frontier spirit under which he construes himself (perverse though it may be). And, as we have previously noted, he is also increasingly associated with the desert. While that can be understood to correlate the gangster and savage character, it also puts him in contrast with Ace whose power and identity are confined to the city. This is best articulated when Ace is called to a meeting "a couple of hundred yards down the road" from the Gold Rush, into the desert which Nicky controls completely, and from which Ace's odds of returning are only 50/50. This scene both demonstrates the danger Westerner Ace faces venturing into the savage-held frontier, but also the danger that gangster-imbued Ace faces when leaving the relative safety of his urban milieu to enter the Westerner's home turf, further confirming the film's exploration of the two archetypes' profound interconnectedness.

From the beginning, Ace, too, is shown to possess some latent gangsterisms, which are initially most apparent in his relationship with Ginger. She is the prototypical gangster's moll, known for her "passive availability and her costliness. She is [emphatically] part of his winnings" (Warshow 138) and her appeal to Ace seems to be based solely on this trait; indeed, his first thought upon seeing her is "what a moll!" As we previously noted, their marriage was never more than a business move, and a risky one at that, yet the liability of remaining attached to her

only increases as the film progresses. That he refuses to let her go, despite being a professional handicapper and thus, well aware of just how harmful she is, further magnifies her place as a status marker.

She embodies the antithesis of the pro-social, pro-communal, pro-family domestication that the ideal Western woman represents. In fact, her out-of-control behavior, more often than not, sees Ace in a more feminized, domestic role in the house: padding around in a bathrobe, feeding their child breakfast and staying up all night waiting for Ginger to return. Although there is a long tradition of a Western hero's love rehabilitating the fallen woman back into respectable society, this does not seem to be Ace's plan for Ginger, nor does she move in that direction on her own accord. The more outrageously she behaves, the wider berth he gives her, reiterating that she is merely a symbol of his success. He does not care about reforming her, she is merely the woman other men desire and thus, must belong to him (even if she 'belongs to him' in name only).

While Ginger is certainly the 'fallen woman,' she does not "share the hero's understanding of life" (Warshow 138) as does the Western saloon girl. Instead, it is the gangster's understanding of life she shares, and the more out-of-control she becomes, the more Ace's behavior resembles the gangster's. In dragging her through the house and out of restaurants, engaging in very public arguments and threatening to kill her, Ace exemplifies the erratic and violent conduct and attitudes we have come to expect of Nicky. Indeed, as the film progress, Ace is increasingly shown making irrational and harmful decisions regarding his business, arguably the most important aspect of his life. In particular, his steadfast refusal to grant the Commissioner's brother-in-law the small favor of even a mind-numbingly useless job, despite knowing full well the power the Commissioner wielded and what was at stake, seems to reflect gangster's "resent[ment towards] conforming to any organization, regardless of its ideological persuasion" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85). Importantly, this refusal, for which only

Ace is responsible, is the catalyst for his problems with the Gaming Control Board. However he continues to insist that his inability to secure a license is a result of Nicky's gangster reputation, suggesting that, like the gangster, he is "denied a legitimate route to power and success" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85) as a result of his environment and the company he keeps.

Certainly, his motivation for the *Ace's High* variety show reflects gangster's "effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd" (Warshow 133). As Ace explains, his TV show provides him with "a forum. I can fight back…. [People] know they can't fuck around with me the way they could if I was an unknown," reinforcing the notion that the gangster "uses [his] depersonalizing milieu and its technology" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85) to actively rebel against it. The show's flashy essence, which stands in direct opposition to the bosses' wish that he take a "quiet" role, reestablishes his "fierce drive to express his individuality" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 89) and displays the "anarchy [that] runs deep within his character" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85). The show is an especially interesting juxtaposition of the gangster and Westerner within Ace, as its title is conceivably a reference to the pulp *Ace-High Western Stories Magazine* from the 1940s, yet it only exists as a result of his gangster behavior intensifying.

Ace's increasing inability "to accept any limits… [over] his own nature" (Warshow 136) is further magnified when he implores Andy Stone (Alan King) to ask the bosses to intercede in his disagreements with Nicky. While Nicky is indeed quickly becoming more of a problem than he is worth, Ace demonstrates that he now feels he can tell the gangsters how to operate, suggesting that, beyond merely being one of them, he understands his role to be *above* them.

Finally, Ace's fundamental sense of self is built upon his identity as a successful casino operator, a career that exemplifies "the perverse alter ego of the ambitious, profit minded American male" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85) perhaps better than the gangster himself.

*Casino* is the only gangster film included in this study that does not contain the Western community dance ritual, perhaps none too subtly implying that nowhere in the film do we find a "community worth saving" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 137). It is also the only film in which 'actual' cowboys appear. Yet beneath their bolo ties and their folksy aphorisms, they, too, are shown to be nothing but gangsters in Western costumes, using the same techniques as their more urban counterparts. The exchange between Ace and County Commissioner Pat Webb (played by LQ Jones, a member of Sam Peckinpah's 'generic stable of actors' who sustained a lengthy career in various cinematic and TV Westerns) in particular, drips with 'personal favors' and other gangster euphemisms understood to be vague but real threats and extortions.

Certainly Webb's parting thought, in which he insists, "your people never will understand the way it works out here, you're all just our guests," recalls the gangster defending his territory, but it also hints at what Peter A. French considers a "dominant theme of the [many] Westerns[:]… the conflict between… the 'world view' of the Westerner and that of the Easterner" (qtd. in Cawelti 129). Of course, Ace is from Kansas City, not the East, but to Webb, Ace is a perfect representation of the "artifices and corruptions of civilization" (Cawelti 69) that the Easterner mistakenly assumes will give him an advantage over the simple rubes of the West. (Ace's Jewishness, an important subtext in the scene, further associates him with the East.) Yet as Webb suggests, and as French and others later confirm, the inherent power of the West will eventually successfully remove the Easterner and his decaying institutions.

In many respects, it makes sense that *Casino* marks the most seamless, inextricable melding of the gangster and Western figure; ending in 1983, it takes place closest to the modern era, in which "the West itself has become more like the rest of the country." Cawelti explains that "in the years since 1970, this mysterious landscape has become increasingly demythologized…. The increasing sameness of the West and East has finally accomplished what Fredrick Jackson Turner prophesied in 1893: the closing of the spatial frontier has led to

the close of a spiritual and cultural frontier" (118) in which the differences between the gangster and Westerner have been eroded away. Intended to be his final meditation on the subject, *Casino* has Scorsese taking this gangster/Western fusion to its logical apogee, exploring the ease with which the gangster and the Western hero can incrementally come to resemble one another, until we reach the point in which "the Western cannot be separated from the gangster film" (Reed & Thompson); the moment in which the gangster and Westerner have become inseparable from one another.

Seven years later, *Gangs of New York* extends this gangster/western fusion into what Leslie Fielder calls the "disguised Western" (355), cleanly and succinctly translating the Classic Hollywood Western, in both narrative and aesthetic style, to the ultimate American urban center, New York City, and the gangster milieux with which the director's name had, by this point, become synonymous.

## Gangs of New York

Scorsese's first film of the 1980s, *Raging Bull* (1980), though maligned and misunderstood upon initial release, has come to be considered as one of the best American films of the decade, included on innumerable (admittedly subjective) critical "best" lists, both limited to the 80s, and spanning the entirety of film history. In a career of canonical 'masterpieces,' it is often designated as Scorsese's best film, the utmost display of his filmmaking prowess. Of course, a concrete ranking of artistic products remains intrinsically illusory and such standings are constantly reassessed, reevaluated and reassigned. Of late, *GoodFellas*, Scorsese's first film of the 1990s, appears to be engendering serious discussion and consideration, among both professional and popular critics who see it as the peak expression of Scorsese's filmmaking abilities and style.

Only time will tell whether *Gang of New York*, Scorsese's first film of the 2000s, will enjoy such retroactive appreciation. Like *Raging Bull,* the initial critical reaction was mixed, with much of the attention focusing on the ballooning budget, financial and creative conflicts with producer Harvey Weinstein, a continually postponed release date, and, finally, a dubious Oscar campaign for Scorsese, instigated by Weinstein's Miramax. Scorsese himself admits the film is "flawed" (Schickel 226), detailing the many story restructurings since its initial inception 25 years earlier, and multiple important set pieces that were left unshot once funding began to dry up, contributing to the "uneven pacing" (McCarthy) that frustrated many critics, and which ultimately led Scorsese to deem the production process "nightmarish," ranking it only behind *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) in terms of "tormented projects" (Schickel 224). Roger Ebert considered the film "very good but not great," suggesting the film lacks the "headlong momentum of a storyteller who knows he has a good one to share" that would place *Gangs* "in the first rank of his masterpieces" (237).

But for longtime *Variety* film critic Todd McCarthy, the film "bears all the earmarks of a magnum opus for Martin Scorsese," citing, in part, its "fascinating and fresh material about his beloved New York City, an epic reach, an equally epic gestation period [and] a dynamic criminal element" that situate the film squarely in Scorsese's oeuvre. While Scorsese intended it to be his next film following *Taxi Driver*, going so far as to take out a two page ad in *Variety* announcing his plan in June of 1977 (Ebert 239; Nashawaty), it would take 25 years to bring it to fruition. (Ironically, the film that did come after *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York* [1977], was plagued by the runaway budgets, multiple lengthy running times, and massive set pieces as was *Gangs*, and inspired many of the same critical complaints, though *Gangs*' mixed response places it far above *New York*'s nearly unanimous negative reception.) What effect, if any, the resulting years had on *Gangs*' overall development and eventual presentation cannot truly be known, of course, though Scorsese suggests its epic framework is a holdover from "a part of [his] mind back in the seventies" (Schickel 230). However, for the purposes of this study, it is fitting that, as the final, culminating film, *Gangs* constitutes a "magnum opus" of the gangster/Western fusion, a "disguised Western" (Fielder 355) in which the gangster facade only barely obscures the Western beneath.

Unlike the other films in this study that embrace their gangster film heritage and aesthetic, helping to mask their Westernness, *Gangs* actively de-emphasizes its gangster elements (title notwithstanding). This is evidenced in the faces that populate the world, as *Gangs* is the only film of this study that does not make use of the director's well established stable of generic actors. Instead, the film gathers together a new group of actors with whom Scorsese would go on to make multiple films: John C. Reilly, Stephen Graham, Liam Neeson, Daniel Day Lewis and Leonardo DiCaprio, with the latter becoming as closely associated with the director's later career output as Robert De Niro was with his earlier works. This seems to indicate a purposeful minimization of the more surface gangster generic signifiers, with

Scorsese opting not to “appeal to [viewers’] previous experience” (Warshow 130), deftly subverting the self-reflexive ‘generic field of reference’ (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 53) that had arisen by this time, in particular, concerning De Niro and Scorsese. Ignoring for a moment that Scorsese’s usual collaborators were much older than many of the roles required, the fact that none of the actors cast were known for playing gangsters or criminals allows the viewer to focus on the characters’ actions and journey, without the actors’ reputations coloring the audience’s interpretation. (In fact, both “extraordinary handsome English actor Daniel Day Lewis” [Cawelti 108] and DiCaprio, whose previous films threatened to typecast him as a young heartthrob, can be understood to be explicitly playing against type.)

While the lack of recognizably gangster faces may be a subtle detail, picked up subconsciously, if at all, and merely shifts our impression *away* from gangsterisms, the overall production design drives us *towards* the film’s Western intentions. The dimly lit buildings of wood and stone, partially dug out of the earth, carved into or perched upon surrounding rock outcropping recall the log cabins and earthen homesteads of early Western settlers, cobbled together from any and all closely available materials and assembled by hand. Paradise Square, at the center of the Five Points, is teeming with bonnet-clad women and farm animals, hay littering the ground, bordered by rudimentary dirt streets with horse drawn trailers and flanked with wood-planked sidewalks. Part of this, of course, is simply the 1860s setting, but in the DVD commentary track, Scorsese specifically describes the neighborhood as “a frontier town, only with no wide open spaces. It’s all claustrophobic instead.” Just as with Western settlements, Scorsese conceived of the neighborhood as “a place ‘in the works’… being built with no plan, [the inhabitants] just buil[ding] things as they needed [them].” While the film was heavily researched, and the set was designed with the help of the historical photographs of Jacob Riis and others, Scorsese specifically cites *Once Upon A Time in the West* (1968) as a stylistic influence (Schickel 227), itself strongly influenced by earlier Hollywood Westerns.

Certainly, the Five Points neighborhood functions as does the Western frontier town, serving “the meeting point between civilization and savagery” (Cawelti 20) “where a city might, some day, be forged.” Traditional Westerns replay this conflict as a way of reaffirming “an essential body of legend and myth about America” (Cawelti 92); since our present position confirms that civilization will inevitability prevail, whatever actions, however violent, that were untaken in in order to ensure civilization’s success are thus understood to be justified. A similar ideology could be interpreted in *Gangs*, for as brutal and gory as the hand to hand fights with knife and club are shown to be, they ultimately resulted in the New York (and America) we know today, rationalizing and validating their necessity (and perhaps even glorifying those who have sacrificed in order to make it a reality).

This outlook is further supported by the presence of (and narrative emphasis on) the Draft Riots. Scorsese explains that many thinkers and social observers of the time viewed New York City as a barometer, “saying that if democracy didn't work in New York, it wasn't going to work anywhere else in the country” (Schickel 229), drawing parallels between the government’s ability to put down the riots and reinstate order and the fledging Western settlement’s capacity to remove the outlaws or Indians disrupting their attempts to establish the rule of law. In either circumstance, our understanding of and reaction to these conflicts is “always qualified and contained in the knowledge that the advance of civilization will eliminate them” (Cawelti 22).

Beyond simply fulfilling another Western qualification by locating the film “at a very particular moment in the past” (Cawelti 20), the Draft Riots specifically comment on the role of the Civil War in the Western. Traditionally, Westerns are set “in the years following the Civil War and reaching into the early twentieth century” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 48), reflecting the historical period of Western expansion and settlement. However, *Gangs* is likewise involved in an identical conflict to establish “codes of law and order as the basis for contemporary social conditions,” in an equally “pre-civilized locale” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 48), only a few years

earlier than most Westerns take place; indeed, *during* the war. This seems to suggest that the movement towards civilization is not a smooth process, flowing consistently and steadily towards civilization and away from savagery, and in a unified, direction motion from East to West. Rather than a bastion of civilization and culture, the film demonstrates that the East the frontier townspeople had left behind was not so genteel and settled after all, and in many ways mirrored the hostilities into which they were heading. (Horace Greeley, the *New York Tribune* founder/editor to whom the phrase, "go West, young man" is attributed, himself makes an onscreen appearance, further [albeit subtly] evoking the Westward migration foundational to the Western.)

Further, it is the government's actions, not those of any of the Five Points' residents, that ultimately puts to rest the conflict between Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Bill (Daniel Day Lewis). Although Bill allows Amsterdam to take his revenge, ostensibly accepting a death at his hand, Bill has already been fatally wounded by shrapnel from the wider battle fought around them. This parallels the historical West, where the actions of the US military proved more effective at quelling the 'savage' and 'Native' threats than any action taken by frontier settlers and pioneer Western heroes.

Yet in a strange way, the resultant Westward migration all but guaranteed that this conflict will continue to play out, carried West with the advancing settlers. This is implicit within the film's narrative. While Bill and Amsterdam see their conflict as a definitive fight, from which an eternal conclusion will (or can) be reached, both Jenny (Cameron Diaz) and Monk (Brendan Gleeson) understand it to be just one small battle in a war that has been raging for "1000 years or more," one with no end in sight and one whose beginnings no one can recall. In this way, *Gangs* acknowledges that "revenge is meaningless… yet it is necessary because it is evidence of a way of life that the hero embodies" (Kitses 97-8), expressing one of the unresolvable conflicts at the heart of the Western genre.

Importantly, like the Western, this is intended only to be a "period of reference," a setting for a myth, and not a historically factual reenactment. While Westerns and *Gangs* are often subjected to disparagement from historians who object to the historical inaccuracies they depict, the setting of these films help to construct an "impression of the time" (Scorsese) as a backdrop in which a story of "regeneration through violence" (Cawelti 121) unfolds. (It is entirely beyond the scope of this study to engage with the cultural ramifications of myth-making and the power of popular film. Using cinematic Westerns as a substitute for the historical truths of westward expansion is extremely problematic for myriad reasons.) *Gangs*, in particular, explicitly acknowledges as much; Amsterdam's voiceover begins by admitting the ensuing tale is a constructed from dreams and partial memories, reminding the viewer of the film's '(re-)creation myth' status and approach.

Although *Gangs* purports to take place "at exactly that moment when options are still open" (Kitses 12), like *Casino* and *GoodFellas* before it, those options are rapidly narrowing. As "in the Western formula," Bill (Daniel Day Lewis), in particular, seems to understand his way of life to be "on the way out" (Cawelti 20), lamenting to Amsterdam that his "civilization is crumbling." This acknowledgement seems to implicitly motivate Bill's insistence that his Nativists "see that he gets an education" when they capture the young Amsterdam after his father's death. Several times throughout the picture, Bill's complex vocabulary and command of the language seem beyond what his social standing might suggest. He insists that Amsterdam tell him the pronunciation of 'ghoul,' not the meaning or an appropriate substitute, suggesting Bill places a high value on literacy and in some way recognizes such a mark of civilization will be beneficial moving into the future. Importantly, Bill's recognition of his dying way of life comes directly after both professing his admiration for Priest (Liam Neeson), and admitting he "never had a son." Having just declared that he and Priest were essentially the same man, divided only by faith, this forces Amsterdam to concede that he is just as much Bill's son as he is Priest's,

and thus has the same savage "life boiling up inside of [him]." Further, by acknowledging the inevitable social progress away from his more primal means of existence, Bill seems to be warning Amsterdam that to follow in their footsteps ultimately holds no future. It is a dead end, literally, and one which Bill tried to steer him away from, as he might hope for his own son.

Of course, Amsterdam is too young and taken by the idea of revenge to fully understand and acknowledge what Bill is trying to impart upon him in the scene. However, like Henry Hill and Ace Rothstein, Amsterdam's retrospective voiceover, which mediates the events to the viewer from some unknown subsequent vantage point, implicitly acknowledges that the neighborhood's lifestyle will "inevitably give way to the maturity of civilization" (Cawelti 61).

Interestingly, that which replaces that savagery anticipates the bleak, depersonalized, alienating milieux that awaits the gangster. Unlike the opening battle, which was fought by those with deeply personal motives for engaging, the final fight sees "modern, disempowered… conscripted soldiers… underprivileged hired guns… [who] have little or no idea for what they are fighting" and who do not even know, let alone hate, those upon whom they are firing (Wernblad 118). Unlike the 'ancient laws of combat,' where physical contact itself placed a limit on the death toll, the "officially legitimized faceless mass killing" wrought by soldiers could (and indeed, do) obliterate entire neighborhoods (Wernblad 188). In this shift, the eye contact between the victor and his victim, that intimate connection paramount to both Priest and Bill is immediately and forever erased of all its value. Thus, in the ultimate triumph of civilization's cold, brutal warfare over the savage's hand-to-hand combat, the film foreshadows "the civilization which the Westerner held at bay… overwhelm[ing] the gangster" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85).

Certainly, to suggest that Amsterdam be understood as the Western hero runs decidedly close to stating the obvious, as his position and journey within the film seem almost perfectly correlated to that of the Westerner; "an individual in the midst of historic transformation, trapped between the old and the new" (Cawelti 76). Amsterdam "presents an image of personal nobility"

(Warshow 141) and is “above all, [a man] in the middle, possessing many qualities and skills of the savages but fundamentally committed to the townspeople” (Cawelti 29). He is insider made outsider, kept apart from the frontier neighborhood so long that, upon his return, he requires a guide to introduce and explain to him the correct cultural norms and behaviors. He is constantly positioned as a mediator, initially between his ethnic heritage and his upbringing at Hellgate, then between his desire to kill Bill and the affection he feels for him, and finally, between the old and new ways, between savagery and civilization, in continuing collaborations and negations with Boss Tweed (Jim Broadbent) and urging Monk into politics. Even Amsterdam’s discovery of the boxing law loophole can be read as a Westerner’s mediation, using his intelligence and the city’s own verbiage against itself for a favorable outcome, rather than relying on Bill’s old ways of threats and aggression. His ultimate decision to reform his father’s gang, under the ostensibly noble cause of avenging his father’s death and removing Bill’s threatening presence, in effect functioning as a mouthpiece for the neighborhood, clearly places him as a “man of personal integrity who acts because society is too weak to do so” (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 57).

Of course, the encroaching civilization is shown to be none too civil itself; the politicians of Tammany Hall are shown to be just as conniving and vicious as the Five Points gangs, trading in innocent human lives for a temporary boost to their own images and careers. Such a display not only confirms that “the sheriff is not always a better person than the man he hangs” (Bazin 146), but overtly critiques, rather than “reaffirm[s, the] essential benevolence of American progress” (Cawelti 53). Nonetheless, Amsterdam fulfills the Westerner’s role in fighting to make way for the new democratic society.

However, the savage aspects of Amsterdam’s personality are ever present as well, reminding the audience that, despite his efforts to usher in law and order to the neighborhood, he will remain a part of the old system, and thus will himself need leave if the new society is to flourish. Beyond his skills with both knife and fist, it is he who sells the corpse to the medical

school, and he who kills one of his own to protect Bill in the theatre, reflecting Warshow's claim that "the Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image… whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men" (142).

Amsterdam also cleanly fits into the 'initiate-hero' category, given, as Wernblad succinctly argues, the film's central conflict between the pulls of the father and the surrogate father figures (both Bill and Monk). While by no means the sole jurisdiction of the Western, the "narrative device of filtering the genre's conflicts through the perceptions of a young initiate-hero appears in many postwar Westerns" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 54). Schatz argues that the Western uses this "education of a young man motif [to] self consciously reflect upon the contradictory lifestyles of those inside and outside of the community" (*Hollywood Genres* 55), though, because of Bill's gangster-esque menace "whose defeat springs with almost mechanical inevitability" (Warshow 143), Amsterdam's choice between alternative idols does not ultimately prove to be difficult, despite the fact that "the community and the Westerner are [here] shown in less romanticized terms" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 55).

Although *Gangs* is best understood to be a "disguised Western" and not a gangster film, despite its title, in typifying the gangster figure as well as the savage, Bill's existence serves as the most direct parallel between the gangster/savage comparison. In Bill the Butcher we have most overt evocation of the Western savage role, for Bill is nothing if not savage. The entire film is designed around his "mastery of the tools of violence" (Cawelti 35) and his perpetual association with the raw meat and sharp metal blades of his profession instill a primitive aura about him. The brutality with which he maintains his control over his frontier territory, even in the face of encroaching civilization, embodies the "lawlessness, love of violence and rejection of the towns settled way of life" inherent in the Western savage (Cawelti 35). The zeal with which Bill gives himself over to barbarism and vicious cruelty, and his unhinged, unpredictable reactions that extend to self mutilation serve as explicit demonstrations of his "close relationship to

madness," which Cawelti sees as "another important aspect of savagery… distinguishing between the hero's disciplined and moral use of violence and the uncontrollable aggression that marks the 'bad' savage" (35).

Though it does not quite receive the same focus as does his violence, Bill also possesses the dangerous and perverse sexual prowess often attributed to Indian/outlaw Western antagonist. Certainly, his harems of prostitutes and his history with Jenny establish his more primitive sexuality, but it also factors greatly into how he intimidates the Schemerhorns during their "slum sociable [sic]/fact-finding reform mission." Unable to physically attack the visiting emissaries of civilization, Bill asserts his dominance over the Points, and by extension, its visitors, by engaging with its most vulnerable member: Schemerhorn's daughter (Lucy Davenport). As Cawelti points out, "women are the primary symbols of civilization" (30), and indeed, she is the first with whom Bill chooses to interact. Their conversation is highly charged, sexualized and animalistic, as Bill looks her up and down, sniffing her hand like a wolf before moving onto her father, complementing him in such a way that only barely masks the implicit threat. Blue-eyed and bonnet-clad, Miss Schemerhorn epitomizes a "value that demands to be protected" (Warshow 138), yet none of the men present prove capable of lifting a finger to defend her, especially not "Happy" Jack (John C. Reilly), an instrument of the law who, just moments previous, had assured the group of their safety. While the film does not emphasize this aspect of Bill's savagery anywhere but in this scene, the fact that it so quickly and completely renders both the slum tour party and the law silent and stiff confirms that Bill does indeed evoke the same wild, untamed sexuality that the frontier settlers feared in Indian figure.

Finally, on a very surface level, if Bill's behavior is not enough to mark him savage, he is, quite literally, the leader of the Native Americans, an overt evocation of the group most often associated with and referred to as savages in classic Westerns.

But, whereas in most Westerns, "the Indian… never represents a meaningful alternative way of life" (Cawelti 21), Bill's way of life offers a powerfully seductive alternative, so much so that Amsterdam, and, by extension, the viewer, is successfully lured in. By allowing the viewer to spend a significant amount of time 'under the dragon's wing,' Scorsese subverts a common Western criticism that the genre presents the savages as simply "occasions for actions rather than as symbols of opposing values" (Cawelti 21). Though the film structures our ultimate allegiances with Amsterdam, in spending time with Bill, an extremely charismatic and strangely likable figure, we are encouraged to understand, and perhaps sympathize with, Bill's vantage point. His hatred of the Irish does not simply exist for its own sake. He accepts Amsterdam and McGloin (Gary Lewis) into his gang and has forged a lucrative business relationship with Jack Mulraney, despite knowing each is the son of Irish immigrants and even having fought opposite Mulraney and McGloin when they were aligned with Priest. Rather, his xenophobic cruelty seems a direct result of Bill's understanding of the immigrants as somehow stealing what his own father was "murdered" to secure, suggesting Bill's issue is not with the Irish themselves, but with those who do not contribute to his (extremely biased) idea of what America is and should be.

While we might not agree with his ultimate conclusions, we nonetheless are invited to recognize Bill's rationale for and justification in defending the America his father died to create, which he perceives to be under attack. Thus, that which we cheer in Amsterdam, we revile in Bill. While we do not see what happens after the events of the film, it is reasonable to assume Amsterdam's character will not willingly secede to the next incoming group that which his Dead Rabbits died for, either. That the same impulse motivates both Bill and Amsterdam to seek the other's destruction confirms that, often times, the "only difference between the protagonist and his antagonist double has to do with their respective attitudes about [the] social order" (Schatz,

*Hollywood Genres* 57). (Certainly, in *Gangs*, an even more succinct, emotional link is forged between Westerner and savage through Amsterdam and Bill's filial relationship.)

In giving the 'Native Americans' fully understandable, relatable motives that mirror those of the protagonist, Scorsese shifts the Western antagonists away from one dimensional "devilish marauders" (Kitses 13) who exist solely to oppose the burgeoning community. Instead, in the character of Bill the Butcher, whom Roger Ebert calls "one of the great characters of modern movies" (236), Scorsese succeeds in offering a complex, and on some level, sympathetic character with whom some audience members may already be ideologically aligned, a task even the later revisionist Westerns often failed to achieve.

As in the Western, the concept of a code of honor is extremely important to *Gangs*' narrative. But whereas in the Western, the code is generally a personal one, possessed, or more aptly, upheld only by the hero, governing and informing his behavior alone, all of the significant male characters of *Gangs* are shown beholden to the "ancient laws of combat" which govern not only "the almost constitutionalist courts of conflict" (Palmer 329), but the way in which all life is taken. Indeed, though his moniker and fearsome reputation would suggest otherwise, even Bill's behavior adheres to the code's prescriptions through most of the film; it is not until Monk's murder that we witness Bill kill anyone who had not likewise entered into a conflict by agreeing to and accepting the rules. Importantly, it is only when he breaks this code by killing Monk in the most cowardly, least respectable way possible that his own imminent death is confirmed; like the gangster, Bill "is *bound* to go on [killing] until he is killed" (Warshow 143).

Indeed, Amsterdam's first attempt at Bill is likewise not according to the ancient laws of combat, and that, more than anything else, supplies the reason for his failure. For as much as vengeance fuels Amsterdam's need to "kill the king in his court," what his attempt in Sparrow's Chinese Pagoda actually represents is a betrayal, both of Bill and of the code. It is not reflective

of the honorable manner in which Priest was killed. Through Bill's position as the villain, we are encouraged to share Amsterdam's anger and hatred towards him. Nevertheless, Bill did nothing wrong; Priest's killing was 'justified' through the ancient laws of combat.

Meanwhile, the manner in which Amsterdam went about his first attempt was, in many ways, as sneaky and dishonorable as Bill's attack on Monk. It is an ambush, as well as a figurative backstabbing. Amsterdam has not challenged Bill, who, ostensibly, did not know he was in a conflict and thus would not be prepared to fight, especially someone who, by this point, is a (ostensibly) trusted associate (or surrogate son). It would not have avenged Priest's death, but rather sullied it, which arguably is Bill's reason for sparing him; Bill and Priest's respect for one another, and, more importantly, their mutual shared respect for the ancient code by which they lived, mandates that Bill serve as a shepherd for Priest's honor and image. (Interestingly, Monk's murder, while enough to condemn Bill to death, does not seem to bring the same stain on his honor or warrior reputation. One such explanation might be due to Monk's qualified relation to the code as a 'gun' for hire, and not a pure warrior, and/or his acquiescence to the new, more civilized way of doing things.)

Annette Wernblad argues that in this moment, "Amsterdam proves to be undeserving" (185), which suggests that Bill will not accept his death from Amsterdam at this point along his 'hero's journey.' However, it seems far more likely that Bill, the custodian of Priest's honor, will not allow him to be avenged in such a cowardly manner. This implies, rather than Amsterdam needing to 'earn' anything, he needs to learn and truly understand the weight and symbolism of this ancient code of honor. Certainly, this reaffirms Bill's position and interest in seeing Amsterdam get an education.

Like the Westerner's code, which transcends any situation in which he finds himself, this code's precedence extends beyond the rift in old/new ways. Monk's final question to Bill, in which he asks whether his people prefer he "silence this relic of the ancient law" or "resolve

[their] grievances the democratic way…. a new testament in a new world" echoes the extreme formality with which challenges were issued, suggesting that the new will never fully supersede the old as long as those who belong to the old ways are still around. This code of honor will continue to govern the frontier town for some time.

For her part, Jenny typifies the Western woman in nearly every facet of the role. Initially, she is portrayed as the quintessential dancehall girl who "share[s] the hero's understanding of life… a prostitute [who] ha[s] come to understand in the most practical way how love can be an irrelevance" (Warshow 138). While she explains her relationship with Bill to be a matter of survival and convenience, qualifying that he "never laid a hand on [her] until [she] asked" and noting that he always treated her well, she nonetheless "finds herself committed by kinship or loyalty to the hero's enemies" (Cawelti 83). Through her various criminal exploits and hustles, she is shown to possess "a quasi-masculine independence: nobody owns her, nothing has to be explained to her and she is not, like a virtuous woman, a 'value' that demands to be protected" (Warshow 138). Indeed, she is shown besting both Johnny (Henry Thomas) (ostensibly, with some regularity) and Amsterdam, not only succeeding in taking his medallion, but doing so when he was prepared to stop her and managing to fool him into thinking he was successful.

Despite their initial antagonism, Jenny chooses Amsterdam on her own accord and "soon discovers that… the hero has an instinctive gentility as well as a strong native intelligence" (Cawelti 72). Significantly, this takes place at the community dance, the most explicit evocation in this study of the Western ritual in both name and function, displaying the denizens of the Five Points whom Amsterdam's efforts will benefit and confirming that they are indeed "a community worth saving" (Schatz, *Old Hollywood* 137). And, true to form, when Amsterdam is seriously injured by Indians (read: Natives/Bill), Jenny's interest in intensified, until "the deep force of their love" (Cawelti 72, 82) achieves what Ace Rothstein did not: the redemption, though the hero's love, of a fallen saloon girl.

After nursing him back to health, Jenny is shown to "take over the role of masculine comrades… becoming the hero's true companion" (Cawelti 43). It is only she who is present when Monk confirms his true allegiances, and is it she, not any of his male followers, who sits perched over his shoulder, training her shotgun at Tweed while the two work out the terms of their agreement. This acceptance into his "group of masculine comrades… the Western hero's true social milieu" confirms her position as "the seemingly corrupt heroine who turns out to be morally pure" (Cawelti 42, 90).

Of course, while Jenny, like *Mean Streets'* Teresa, offers a concrete way out of the neighborhood and the "archaic one-track male world" (Wernblad 186) it represents, we understand that Amsterdam will not and cannot accept it. Ultimately, "the code of masculine honor must always take precedence over other obligations" (Cawelti 72) and, as he reminds us, "[he] was about [his] father's business." In keeping in the Classic Western vein, however, this does not severely affect their relationship, for "in the end, hero and heroine are clearly on their way to marriage, a family, and a settled life" (Cawelti 83). As in the Western, *Gangs* ultimately ends with a "rebirth of… ideal relationships between men and women" (Cawelti 89), as Jenny's attempt to flee without Amsterdam ends in disaster and she is forced her back into his company, all earlier traces of self-reliance seemingly vanished along with her earthly possessions. In a reversal of one of the Westerner's great fears, that of being domesticated by the woman, it is Jenny who ends up "forsaking a way of life" (Warshow 138) for Amsterdam, becoming something of a 'value' that needs protecting, a fate befalling many Western heroines who were likewise 'rehabilitated' into society through the Westerner's love.

Fulfilling the Western formula's final stipulation, the ending sequence sees Amsterdam, Jenny by his side, having successfully paved the way for the new American democracy by putting the old ways to rest, "depart [ostensibly] for some more remote frontier" (Warshow 140), free to "go off and seek the promise of the … new world" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 50) in

which he fought to create. Importantly, we do not see our hero 'ride off into the sunset.' Rather, it is the sunset which envelops the land, as we explicitly watch "the cowboy's distant fears" dissolve into "the gangster's daily angst" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85). By closing the film with the progression of the New York City skyline, the film shifts the focus away from any of the characters' individual journeys and back onto the city itself. Just as Western films ideologically serve as coming-of-age narratives for the country, *Gangs of New York* is a coming-of-age tale for 'America's City,' depicting the "extraordinary struggle [that birthed] the city that we know now" (Scorsese). For as much as the film revolves around Amsterdam's need to avenge his father's death, it is ultimately New York City that deals the fatal blow. The film's central conflict is finally ended because "the world changed around them" (Scorsese), not as a direct result of Amsterdam's actions.

The triumphant, uplifting score that takes the picture to its end credits stresses the Classic Western's "absence of sadness associated with the passing of the frontier (and the attitudes that went with it) [which] depend[s] on our sense that it had turned out well — that the victorious civilization was what we hoped it would be" (Ray 237-8). However, Scorsese's insistence that the Twin Towers remain in the skyline's final iteration, a potent symbol given the film's release date[5], likewise imbues *Gangs* with the "new awareness of contemporary difficulties" (Ray 238) subsequently faced by the victorious civilizations, with which later Westerns often contended, making *Gangs* perhaps the most thorough example of a 'disguised Western.'

Although its creator may deem it "flawed," critics may site an uneven narrative and historians may point to the use it made of dramatic license, *Gangs* is exemplary for the near-complete way in which it recontextualizes the myriad Western tropes and prescriptions,

[5] In fact, the events of September 11, 2001 were directly responsible for one of the film's (many) release date postponements.

translating them to the genre and city for which Scorsese is best known. As we have observed, *Gangs of New York* is indeed a “magnum opus” of the gangster/Western fusion that pervades Scorsese’s previous works, and it deserves the critical distinction of being recognized as such.

# Conclusion

As a result of having spent five decades making movies in Hollywood, there are certain expectations that accompany a ticket to "a Martin Scorsese picture." Despite my best efforts with this study, 'a Western' is likely to remain near the bottom of that list. After all, as John G. Cawelti writes, "the Western is [at least] initially defined by its setting" (17) and Scorsese himself acknowledges that he was originally drawn to the Western because that setting was so opposite the world in which he was living, the world which he so frequently depicts on his own screens. As he later explained to Richard Schickel, he had assumed early in his career that "if there were any role for [himself] in American cinema, it would be the gangster film" (72), and while he has made films set in the Western United States (*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* [1974], *Casino*) and films consciously inspired by Westerns (*Taxi Driver*), the gangster genre has proved the genre he most revisits, and the genre to which his most popular and acclaimed works belong.

But while the Western is perhaps the only genre whose setting is inextricably linked by name, as innumerable scholars have shown, the Western is defined by so much more than simply the arena in which its action occurs. If it were the case that a Western's landscape was the most important determining factor of the genre, we might be encouraged to see *Shane* (1953) as belonging to a fundamentally different genre than *The Searchers* (1956); after all, one is set on the plains, the other in the desert. Yet despite subtle differences, (explanations of which are certainly beyond my scope here) both films are, inarguably, Westerns. These films feature as their protagonist a psychologically stagnant man, with ties to both the 'civilized' burgeoning frontier community and the 'savage' landscape out of which he first appeared at the start of the film. Prompted by a stringent, unbending personal code of honor, these protagonists ultimately fought to allow the continued presence (and growth) of the community, to their own personal detriment; because these protagonists could not forsake the savage elements of their

own personality, by the film's end, they were forced to return to the harsh landscapes from whence they had initially arrived.

As I have illustrated, this same basic premise can be found in five of Scorsese's films most widely recognized as gangster films. (The sixth, *Taxi Driver,* of course, is the outlier; despite its blatant Western inspirations, it categorically does not follow this formula, instead presenting Travis as the antithesis of a psychologically stagnant Westerner.) JR of *Knocking* is a man in the middle, caught between the savagery of his neighborhood peers, and the encroaching civility of late 20th century American culture, as represented by the Girl. His ultimate rejection of her is based on a stringent personal code informed less by his stanch religiosity, of which we see little evidence, and more by his obsession with Hollywood Western heroes. *Mean Streets*' Charlie, on the other hand, is extremely concerned with spiritual matters, and explicitly derives his personal code from his Catholic faith, but he too finds himself mediating between the neighborhood civilization and his friends' savagery. While his quest to 'save' Johnny mirrors that of Ethan Edwards' mission to 'save' Debbie in *The Searchers*, unlike Ethan, Charlie refuses recognize that his adherence to his code comprises a 'basic incompatibility' with society's laws. Because he will not remove himself, society is forced to banish him. *GoodFellas*, too, presents Henry as a mediator of civilization and savagery, though because of his vested interest in appearing "less violent and insensitive than his [gangster] friends" (Wernblad 42), we are left to question whether he is indeed "fundamentally committed to" civilization (Cawelti 29), or whether, through his voiceover, he is merely mediating the savage gangster lifestyle to the civilized viewer for his own personal gain. In *Casino*, Ace demonstrates that he is "fundamentally committed to the townspeople" (Cawelti 29) as he works to, at least, superficially, distance himself from the gangsters. However, because Ace continues to work for the benefit of the "bosses back home" and does not fully commit to the town, (by now, a corruption of the pro-social progress the frontier community represented) he, too, is

banished. Finally, *Gangs'* Amsterdam is but a thinly disguised Westerner, clearly navigating between civilization and savagery. While he eventually succeeds in securing the longevity of the frontier settlement by vanquishing the savage 'Native Americans,' he fully understands that, as the last vestige of the old ways, he must depart in order for pro-social American Democracy to flourish.

Additional Western signifiers, such as the community dance ritual, the way the female characters are portrayed and, especially in the latter three films, the narrative's position at a specific point in American history, just at the end of an era, when the window of opportunity is still open, but the frontier is rapidly closing, further signify the Western's influence over the selected films. Rather than viewing the Western as a restricting genre that must meet superficial regional requirements, an understanding which Jim Kitses argues wrongly "presupposes that there is such a thing as *the* Western" (17), this study has demonstrated that the Western is instead "a complex variable, its peculiar alchemy allowing a wide range of intervention, choice and experimentation by scriptwriter and director" (Kitses 20).

Scorsese appears uniquely, yet implausibly, well positioned to demonstrate this, given his lifelong devotion to the medium, an expansive knowledge of its past offerings and a childhood spent sequestered in the theaters, more often than not obsessing over the very genre which Andre Bazin saw to "possess… a secret that somehow identifies it with the essence of cinema" (141). Further, as we have seen, the Westerner is not so dissimilar from the gangster. Indeed, the gangster seems to be merely an extension (or, perhaps more aptly, a descendent) of the Westerner, a man of similar fortitude, desires and drive, only the time period and their relationship to society divide them. The Westerner, having arrived on the scene much earlier, is afforded the luxury of leaving the community for the vast expanse of unsettled wilderness. The gangster, coming much later, cannot. Since there is nowhere left to escape from the "depersonalizing… intangible forces of social order and civilization which have created the

modern city" (Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* 85), civilization has no choice but to crush him; when there is no longer a frontier to which he can be exiled, he must die.

So while the Western's influence has been implicit in the gangster genre from the beginning, it is in the films of the Western-obsessed Sicilian-American from the Lower East Side where that impact is most pronounced. Regardless of whether or not Scorsese consciously intended for these films to reflect this gangster/Western fusion, the films of this study confirm that "like scripture, the Western offers a world of metaphor, a range of latent content that can be made manifest depending on the filmmaker's awareness and preoccupation" (Kitses 22). As Cawelti confirms, "in the hands of skillful writers and directors who instinctively understand these relationships and knew how to exploit them, Westerns could become highly effective works of art" (46), and indeed, in the hands of Martin Scorsese, they are.

In July of 2017, *Variety* confirmed that Scorsese was officially attached to the film the film adaptation of David Grann's *Killers of The Flower Moon* (Vivarelli). The non-fiction book, released only a few months earlier, details the murders of several prominent members of the Osage tribe after oil is discovered on their lands during the height of the Oklahoma oil boom, and the subsequent federal involvement that, as the book's subtitle suggests, lead to the birth of the FBI. Soon after the announcement of his involvement in the project, Scorsese declared he and his longtime collaborators, which at the time of this writing include De Niro, DiCaprio, production designer Dante Ferretti and director of photography Rodrigo Prieto, understand the film to be a Western. Immediately, other industry trades and popular entertainment websites like *Deadline* and *IndieWire* picked it up; soon, the media almost ubiquitously began referring to the film as the director's "first Western" (Sharf).

Scorsese's recognition of the source material's Westernness is certainly apt; in his review of the book, *Rolling Stone* editor Sean Woods cites the "almost mythic characters from

our past – stoic Texas Rangers … and murderous desperadoes… [out of the] American frontier" that populate a story ultimately concerned with "a nation's struggle to leave its frontier culture behind and enter the modern world." Its physical setting and seeming cowboy/Indian conflict only bolster such an interpretation, though Scorsese confirms that while "there are certainly cowboys [in the picture, who ride in] cars [as well as on] horses… the film is mainly about the Osage" (Sharf). Only time will tell whether or not this study will need to be adapted and amended to include *Killers of the Flower Moon* upon its release, though the criminal "underworld" element whose presence is alluded to by Scorsese, Grann and the numerous book reviews seem to suggest the film would be an impeccable inclusion, fitting squarely with the parameters of this study.

Regardless of how the film is eventually actualized, however, as this study has set out to prove, *Killers of the Flower Moon* will not, in fact, be the director's first Western, not by a long shot. In an odd sort of way, Martin Scorsese has been making Westerns his whole career.

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